

THE 3 INVESTIGATORS in

THE TRAIL OF THE MASTER OF DISGUISE





in

**THE TRAIL
OF THE
MASTER OF DISGUISE**

Former Rocky Beach Chief of Police Samuel Reynolds is abducted. For his release, the abductor challenges The Three Investigators to play a game using strange clues that will lead them from one place to another. To make it even more difficult, the abductor is a known master of disguise. Jupiter, Pete and Bob set off on a breathless chase that leads through the blazing heat of the Nevada desert. Faced with frustrations, they have to resort to controversial means to keep up with the abductor... and confusion sets in when the game takes on a new twist.

The Three Investigators
in
The Trail of the Master of Disguise

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(The Three ???: Road of Horror)

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1. The Game Begins

“Summer classes!” Without a greeting, Pete Crenshaw stormed into the headquarters of The Three Investigators.

Headquarters was an old mobile home trailer located in the premises of The Jones Salvage Yard in Rocky Beach. The trailer was hidden under a mountain of scrap metal and junk to protect it from outsiders. Access to it was through secret passages known only to The Three Investigators.

Pete flung his backpack into the corner and slammed the door with such force that the trailer shook. Then he dropped into an armchair.

Bob Andrews looked up in surprise from the file he was about to place into a folder. “I guess our camping trip on the coast is off then?”

“You got it,” Pete said angrily. “I failed maths and history.”

Jupiter Jones cleared his throat. “How can you fail history anyway? It’s really a purely learning subject.”

“That’s exactly what my father will ask me tonight,” Pete replied, “and then there will be another eternally long sermon about how I should try harder at school.”

“You’ll survive,” Bob said encouragingly.

Pete pushed his school backpack away from him with the tip of his foot. “Honestly, I don’t feel like doing any of this. I’d love to be an adult right now and not have to deal with school work, summer classes and all that stuff.”

“Then you would miss out on the highlights of high school like the crowning of the Homecoming King, the Prom Ball and the endless speeches at graduation,” Jupiter said with undisguised irony in his voice.

“Since it is certain that you’re going to give the valedictory speech, Jupe,” Pete said, “I wouldn’t mind missing out on that!”

“In any case, I don’t see a fairy godmother anywhere around to grant you that wish, Pete, so take it as it is,” Bob said with a grin.

Pete gave him a nasty look. “Admit it—you’re happy that our camping trip is falling through! That way you have the summer free for beach parties, rock concerts and stuff like that.”

Bob was about to protest when the phone rang.

Jupiter reached for the handset and picked it up. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

Bob turned back to the files and Pete buried himself in his chair with his arms folded. Jupiter, on the other hand, sat up straight as if someone had drilled a sharp object into his back.

The First Investigator reached for the button for the loudspeaker and hastily pressed it. It crackled, then the voice of the caller could be heard: “—So if you want Chief Reynolds to have a few more nice years as a retiree, you’d better stick to my rules!”

Bob almost dropped the folder he was holding in his hand in shock.

“Yes, sir!” said Jupiter in a hoarse voice. “—But what exactly do—”

“Just listen to me!” the caller interrupted him gruffly. “I strongly suspect that you are interested in Reynolds’s welfare.”

“Of course, sir! And—”

“Shut up! Listen to what I’m telling you. I’m giving you and your two investigator lackeys a once-in-a-lifetime chance to free him. To do that, you have to find me. I will let you know exactly what you need to know!”

The Three Investigators exchanged confused glances. Pete formed a silent “What?” with his mouth.

“As in any real game, I have fixed rules. If you break them, you lose. That would be a shame for good old Reynolds.” The caller paused briefly but effectively. Then he continued: “—But now to the essentials...

“Rule Number One is—no police. Under no circumstances do you contact the police—not Inspector Cotta and not his colleagues. The same goes for sheriffs, marshals or even FBI officials. Law enforcement officers of any kind are therefore categorically excluded.”

“Okay, sir,” Jupiter murmured.

“Rule Number Two—you keep your parents and other friends out of this. That means you don’t talk to them about my game, you don’t send them messages and you don’t call them from the road.”

“Yes, sir,” Jupiter brought out hoarsely.

“—And of course, this doesn’t just apply to parents, but also to uncles and aunts, Jupiter Jones!”

The First Investigator spared himself an answer. He had clenched his left hand into a fist.

“Rule Number Three—you follow my instructions unconditionally. If I give you a hint, you follow it no matter when it comes or where it leads you.”

Jupiter was still silent. The caller didn’t seem to mind.

“—And finally, Rule Number Four—use all your investigation skills and the objects I send you. If you catch me, you win. If not... well, you can go figure it out yourself. I hope you have imagination!”

The First Investigator drew in his breath sharply.

“Then the game has officially begun. My name is Mitch Palmer. You will be hearing from me.”

There was a crackle on the line, and the caller hung up.

Jupiter, however, did not hang up. He held the handset in his hand, just as if waiting for another message. Bob and Pete also seemed to need a moment to digest what they had heard.

Samuel Reynolds, the former chief of police of Rocky Beach, had become a good friend to The Three Investigators. Although he had retired for some time, the three boys had kept in contact with him and still called him ‘Chief Reynolds’. They had never forgotten that the former chief had supported them in their investigations, even after his retirement.

“That was just a joke, wasn’t it?” asked Pete, stunned.

“I certainly hope so!” said Bob dazedly.

“In the first place, we have to find out whether the caller was telling the truth,” Jupiter thought aloud.

“Then let’s just call Reynolds!” suggested Pete.

“That might be difficult,” Bob interjected. “As far as I know, he’s been away since last week... and I have no idea where.”

“So we just have to find out how to reach him,” replied Pete indignantly.

“How? We only have his landline number.”

“We happen to be investigators,” Pete said impatiently. “We could try to find out the number of his neighbours and call them. He must have told someone where he was staying. If he is in a hotel, we can find out the number and then call there.”

“But if Reynolds has indeed been abducted, we could put him in even more danger with our investigation!” retorted Bob.

“Why is that?” said Pete indignantly. “This abductor has given us four rules. Not one of them is ‘Enquiries are forbidden’, right?”

“That’s true,” Bob admitted.

A steep wrinkle appeared on Jupiter’s forehead. “Well, I don’t know about you guys, but I need more information before I can make a decision. If the caller was telling the truth, we’re dealing with an extremely delicate matter!”

“At least the caller gave his name—if he wasn’t lying about that.”

“Right! Mitch Palmer.”

“Then I would suggest that we try to verify Chief Reynolds’s abduction,” Bob said. “At the same time, we should find out more about this Mitch Palmer. After all, he definitely didn’t forbid us to do that.”

The First Investigator switched on the computer. “Maybe the name is even the first clue.”

“Good, then I’ll do the research. I could also go to the newspaper archives later,” Bob offered. “If Mitch Palmer is a known criminal, there should be something there.”

“Juupeeterrr!” Aunt Mathilda’s voice echoed across the salvage yard.

“Oh no!” Jupiter scowled. “I really don’t have the time to scrub old ovens or dust battered furniture right now.”

“Juupeeterrr!”

“I’ll be right back,” Jupe sighed. “Hopefully I’ll manage to serve Aunt Mathilda a good excuse!”

The First Investigator gave his friends a contrite look and then stepped out of the trailer into a short dark tunnel of corrugated sheet metal. The tunnel led to the external back wall of an old refrigerator which they named the ‘Cold Gate’, and it was a secret exit to the salvage yard. This back wall could be slid to one side to allow Jupe to enter the interior of the fridge. There he slowly opened the fridge door, took a peek outside to ensure that no one was looking before slipping out to the salvage yard.

The glaring Californian summer sun blinded the First Investigator. It was the perfect weather for a multi-day cycling tour. Yesterday, The Three Investigators had chosen a route along the coast, but now their holiday plans were in an unattainable distance.

“There you are at last!” Aunt Mathilda greeted her nephew. She had a clipboard with a checklist in her hand and her sternest sergeant look on. This looked like a long and hard work session! Mrs Jones was never at a loss for ideas on how to keep The Three Investigators usefully occupied. Boys, in her eyes, were made for hauling old items, repairing appliances or refurbishing furniture.

“Pete, Bob and I have a very important thing going on right now, but I’m afraid I can’t tell you anything about it,” Jupiter began.

However, Aunt Mathilda smiled. “You’ve got mail!”

She turned and reached for a rectangular package she had set down next to a tray of large chocolate biscuits. “This was left for you.”

“But the postman had already come earlier this morning!” the First Investigator wondered.

“Someone left this on the verandah. So can you just take it now?” She pressed the package into her nephew’s arms. “There’s one more thing...”

“What?” Jupiter looked at the box. There was no return address on it, just three big question marks.

“We’re getting a big load of antique furniture tomorrow. We’ll definitely need your help unloading it.”

“Understood.”

“Wait!”

Jupiter turned to his aunt once more.

“The biscuits are for you! As a kind of advance payment for your work.”

Jupiter thanked his aunt for the biscuits and hurried back to his friends. They were both sitting in front of the computer by now.

“Have you found out anything yet?” he asked as he stepped into the semi-darkness of the trailer.

“This Mitch Palmer is indeed a wanted criminal!” Pete said as Jupiter joined them, “but there’s not exactly a lot of information about him.”

“There is talk of a bank robbery here.” Bob pointed at the screen. “—And he’s probably broken into a couple of museums as well, but the reports are all very short. You can hardly learn anything about Palmer and his methods.”

“Almost like there’s something you’re not supposed to know,” Pete added.

“We’re not getting anywhere like this. I should go to the *Los Angeles Times* as soon as possible,” Bob decided. “After all, Palmer didn’t forbid us to check his identity. The good thing is that my Dad is in San Diego today. I can’t let him see me there because of Rule Number Two—no parents!”

Bob’s father worked as a journalist and editor for the *Los Angeles Times*. Through him, Bob had had access to the newspaper’s archives and this had proved very useful in getting information for their previous cases.

“I actually think it’s a good idea to go to the newspaper archives,” Jupiter said as he placed the rectangular package and the biscuits on the desk.

“Poor Chief Reynolds!” Pete looked up. “What’s that for?” he asked, pointing to the desk.

“This box was just delivered to us. It was left on the verandah!”

“I meant the biscuits. Are they for us?”

“Pete, how can you think of food in this situation?” Jupiter looked reproachfully at his friend. “Even I couldn’t get anything down right now! Besides, I wonder if this box has something that Mitch Palmer wanted us to have.”

“It’s all right.” The Second Investigator hurriedly raised his hands. “Let’s unwrap the mysterious package now!”

Jupiter put on gloves. “We will check the box for fingerprints later, so please don’t touch it everywhere.” Carefully, he untied the string and opened the lid.

“Well?” Pete tried to peek inside the box past Jupiter’s hands.

The First Investigator reached into the package and pulled out three plastic cards. “These are driver’s licences!” he exclaimed and held out one of the cards. On it was a photo of Bob.

“Wait a minute!” Bob said, puzzled. “I’m sure that this photo of me is from a recent article about us in *Rocky Beach Today*! It’s cropped to look like a passport photo. Are these fake licences?”

“Look at your date of birth!” Jupiter said instead.

“Hey!” Bob said. “My date of birth is wrong, but my address is correct. This is very strange.”

Pete added: "Now that you mention it, your day and month of birth is not what matters. Take a look at the year!"

"If my date of birth is wrong, it's wrong," Bob said. "Why does the year even matter then?"

"According to this licence, you would already be twenty-one years old," Jupiter took over. "That means that you'll be of age and old enough, for example, to legally drink alcohol."

"Not to mention that with this licence you can rent any DVD with an age restriction," Pete added. "Horror movies, for example."

"Whatever." Jupiter glanced at the remaining two driver's licences. "It's the same with these. The year shows that Pete and I are also twenty-one."

"Fine, so they've granted my wish," Pete said insecurely. "Now we can pass off as adults without having grown a day older for it, and I can finally legally watch *The Return of the Chainsaw Zombies*... but what are the driver's licences for? They're hardly going to be an invitation to drive to the nearest bar and knock back a few tequilas, are they?"

Jupiter did not answer him. Instead, he reached into the package again, flipped over a bubble wrap and pulled out a black object. Bob's eyes snapped open.

"What? Oh no! ... This can't be... No!" Pete stared stunned at the gun in Jupiter's hands.

2. Strict Instructions

Jupiter inspected the gun he had just took out from the box.

“This is too much, Juve!” Bob exclaimed.

“This is a bit too weird for me now!” protested Pete. “First someone calls and claims that he has abducted Chief Reynolds; then we are supposed to take part in a strange game; and now someone is sending us fake IDs and weapons!”

Jupiter turned the weapon slowly in his hands and then said: “Not to worry, Pete!”

“What?” Pete exclaimed. “Hey, don’t point that thing towards me!”

“This is not a real gun,” Juve calmly said after examining the gun carefully.

“You mean it’s a toy?” Bob asked. “How do you know?”

“Well, firstly, it is too light for a real gun,” Juve explained. “Secondly, it is made of plastic... and specifically, it says here that it is ‘Made in China’.”

“Well,” Pete said in relieve, “even if this is a fake, is it even legal for us or anyone for that matter to carry it around?”

“As far as I know,” Jupiter began, “it is not illegal in California to own an imitation firearm, just as it is legal to own a registered firearm. It is only unlawful to display it in public—particularly in such a way that it could make people believe that the gun could be real.”

“So?” Pete said. “If it is unlawful to display it, it is unlawful. What more can I say?”

“Look!” Juve continued. “There are three of these.” The First Investigator took out two more identical toy guns and laid them side by side on the desk.

“They look real to me,” Bob said as he took one of the guns to look at it.

“Yes,” Jupiter agreed as he activated the unlocking mechanism and then pulled the magazine out of the handle. “It looks and operates like a real gun.”

“Are people of our age even allowed to own or carry guns?” Pete asked.

“In California, a licensed dealer is prohibited from selling, supplying, delivering, transferring or giving possession or control of any firearm to any person under the age of 21 years, except specifically exempted,” Juve explained.

“There you go,” Pete said. “We had better get rid of these things before we get arrested.”

“—But you are forgetting that we now have IDs showing that we are 21 years old,” Juve countered.

“You’ve gotta be joking, Juve!” Pete cried. “You are not thinking of using these things, are you?”

“What I would want to do is to see what Palmer has in store for us...” Juve said calmly. “For that, we have to play along with his game, otherwise we would not go far in our attempt to rescue Chief Reynolds.”

“What other surprises do we have?” Bob looked helplessly into the box. At the bottom there was still a white envelope and a CD in an unlabelled plastic sleeve.

“Will you hand me that CD?” Jupiter put the toy gun down and held out his free hand to Bob.

“Wait a minute, Juve! You won’t want to play that on our computer, would you?” Pete warned as Jupiter took the CD out of its sleeve. “There could be viruses on it. You should really know that by now!”

“Yes, of course I do,” Jupiter replied, “which is why I have a solution for it.”

The First Investigator went to the chest of drawers where he kept his technical equipment. Besides a whole lot of cables, batteries, circuit boards, wires, old hard disk drives, mobile phone accessories and self-made gadgets, there was also a laptop in one of the drawers, of which he took out.

“What do you want with that?” the Second Investigator asked as Jupiter wordlessly began to connect the laptop to a power supply. Then he flipped the device open.

“This is a spare laptop that I’ve set aside for purposes like this,” Jupe explained. “If there is any malware, it will only damage this laptop and not our main computer. Nowadays, even with updated anti-malware software, a computer can never be fully secured.”

Jupiter moved the mouse and clicked on a file on the CD. A video player then opened and a recording began playing.

They could see a poorly lit room, presumably the boiler room of an old house. The picture quality left a lot to be desired, but the most important thing was clearly visible—Chief Reynolds was sitting tied up in a chair. He had dirt stains on his shirt and his hair was sticking out of his head. He was not gagged, however. Reynolds was busy swearing at the cameraman. Normally, Pete would have made a comment about how he didn’t trust their friend to say such things, but the situation was too serious for that.

“Come on, show me your face, you scumbag!” The chief called out angrily.

That was all that could be seen of him, as the front page of a copy of the *Los Angeles Times* was held up to the video camera. For a few seconds it filled the screen, then a black screen followed.

“So Mitch Palmer really did abduct Chief Reynolds!” Bob was the first to regain his speech.

“Maybe it’s an old recording?” pondered Pete.

“No, the newspaper that was shown was from yesterday!” said Jupiter, who was looking at a still picture.

“No matter what that idiot says, I think we should call Cotta now,” Pete said. “This case is way out of our league!”

“We better not!” Bob countered. “If Palmer finds out, Reynolds will be harmed!”

“Maybe he’s just bluffing,” Pete interjected. “How is he supposed to—”

Jupe immediately raised his hands to interrupt Pete and then said: “No, Pete. We have to follow Palmer’s instructions strictly if we want him to release Reynolds.”

The First Investigator indicated a sign with his fingers. It was the secret sign that The Three Investigators had devised for the word ‘bug’—not for the insect, but for a little microphone. Then he reached for a notepad and hastily wrote something down. Pete and Bob leaned over him. It said:

HQ may be bugged!

“Not again!” Pete cried.

Jupiter put a finger to his lips and nodded. Then he signalled to his colleagues to search the trailer. The Three Investigators were very experienced at this by now. Within half an hour, they had turned everything upside down, but found nothing.

“I suppose we can discuss now?” Bob finally asked.

However, the First Investigator continued to write on the notepad:

Can discuss EXCEPT anything against Palmer’s rules!

“Okay,” Bob agreed.

“We don’t know what kind of capabilities Palmer has,” Jupiter warned. “He might even be spying on us elsewhere.”

“Just think of our case with that Mr Grey,” Pete added. “That gangland boss was spying on us for days.”

“So we should take care of the research first,” Bob said uneasily.

“That’s right, you’d best head straight for the *Los Angeles Times* office.”

“Not so fast! Fellas, there’s something else in the parcel!” Pete pointed to an envelope at the bottom of the box.

“Right!” Jupiter carefully opened the envelope. Inside were two items—a photo of a man standing in front of a flowering bush, and a simple written note with a date and a time.

“Well, that’s really very revealing,” Pete said.

Jupiter turned the photo. On the back was written in cursive:

Let the hunt begin.

With best regards,

P.

“This must be Palmer,” Bob guessed. He leaned forward. “The man looks pretty average. The coat and moustache are a bit unfashionable.”

“—And the gold watch isn’t exactly the latest thing either,” Pete added, “neither is the ugly man’s ring and glasses.”

“This is not something from a fashion magazine,” Jupiter interjected. “It’s about what conclusions we can draw from this photo.”

“Maybe it’s the first clue to how we can find him!” Pete said.

“In combination with the note, that is definitely an obvious possibility,” Jupiter agreed. “He seems to want to show us what he looks like so we can recognize him.”

“But why should we even look for him?” Pete asked.

“Unlike other criminals, Mitch Palmer does not seem to be primarily concerned with the crime, but with the thrill that comes with it,” Jupiter speculated. “That’s probably why he wants to show us how he looks like.”

“In that old-fashioned coat?”

“Never mind that now!” Bob tapped impatiently on the table and reached for the note. “I’d rather know what this note is about!”

“Indeed,” Jupiter agreed. “It may be more informative for us than the photo.”

Bob read the words on the note:

14th June

1:00 am

“Today is the thirteenth,” Pete said. “That means we only have a few hours left! Great! If this is really an invitation to a meeting, what good it is without giving us a location?”

“Don’t be so hasty, Pete.” Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “So, for his game, our mysterious Mr Palmer sends us fake IDs, fake weapons, a photo—presumably of himself—and a clue that we can’t completely decipher at first glance.”

Bob went to the door. “I don’t think we’ve ever had an opponent as strange as Palmer. All the more important that we find out more about him. I’m going to the newspaper archives right now.”

3. A Master of Disguise

When Bob called Headquarters late that afternoon, he was crestfallen. “I really searched through everything here. I managed to get a couple of reports about Palmer, but they were nothing informative... at least not more than what we already knew from the Internet.”

Bob was calling from the archives of the *Los Angeles Times* located in a huge basement room of the newspaper’s multi-storey office complex in Los Angeles. This was where all the years of the newspaper were stored, as well as the reporters’ files. Hard copies of old newspapers were bound in thick, large-format volumes, and placed on shelves. The collection was invaluable.

“Failures in research are something an investigator has to expect,” said Jupiter, who had spent the time until Bob’s call examining the box in the laboratory. “—But in this particular case, I was hoping for better results.”

“I can’t do magic,” Bob replied. “Did you at least find out something?”

“On the outside of the box were my fingerprints and those of Aunt Mathilda, of course, but inside, on the envelope and on the CD—nothing. The driver’s licences must have been made by a very skilled forger. They look deceptively real.”

“That doesn’t do us much good,” Bob remarked.

“Why don’t you come back to Headquarters so we can discuss what to do next,” Jupiter said.

“Uh... huh...” Bob murmured. “Hey! Wait a minute...”

“What is it?” Jupiter asked.

“Hold on here,” Bob replied. “I might be able to get something more. Talk to you later!” With that, he hung up.

The next moment, he went straight to the desk of Mrs Grayson, the person in charge of the archives. She was responsible for meticulously recording the holdings and had been busy for years getting old issues photographed and digitized. She had helped The Three Investigators, especially Bob, many times in their previous cases.

“Yes, Bob?” Mrs Grayson looked up from her desk and took off her reading glasses. “Found something that you are looking for?”

“Not exactly,” Bob replied, “but I noticed that this news article that I have here was written by Jeff White.” He showed Mrs Grayson a copy of the report.

Jeff White was a reporter as well as Bob’s father’s colleague at the newspaper. Bob recalled that his father had once told him that Jeff had ‘a real elephantine memory’. In fact, the reporter had assisted Bob before by providing him with vital information for his investigation. Now, more than ever, Bob hoped that Jeff could be of help to him again.

“Let me guess,” Mrs Grayson said. “You want to know more about this report, right?”

“Yes!” Bob replied. “It would help me very much if I could contact him right away.”

“Better than that,” Mrs Grayson said. “I saw him at lunch time just now. I can give him a call and see if he can spare some time to help you!”

Immediately after Mrs Grayson had spoken to Mr White, Bob thanked her, rushed out of the archives and took the lift up to see the reporter.

Later that evening, Bob was back at Headquarters.

“What was that all about, Bob?” the First Investigator asked after Bob had plopped himself onto a chair.

“Yes, I do have some important information,” Bob began.

“Wait a minute,” Jupe said. “You said there weren’t much from the reports you found.”

“Yes,” Bob replied, “but I spoke to Jeff White, one of the reporters who wrote a news article about Palmer. Sometimes, certain information reporters get are not included in the news report for various reasons—as in the case for Mitch Palmer.”

“Okay,” Jupe said, “so you have more stuff. Let’s hear it!”

“The press was not allowed to write much about Palmer because his case is not exactly a glorious chapter in criminal history,” Bob said. “According to Jeff White, Mitch Palmer actually commits his crimes not primarily to enrich himself, but to challenge the police.”

“That’s absurd,” Pete commented.

“There’s more,” Bob continued. “Palmer always laid his tracks to places that had something to do with his pursuer. As a master of disguise, he has even turned up at police stations, for example, as an electrician or a postman. Another time he stayed for several days in the holiday home of an FBI official.”

“Hmm... a master of disguise...” Jupe pondered, “which is probably why he could give us an outright photo of himself. Perhaps he is always in disguise such that we would not be able to recognize him.”

“Then maybe he’s even at the Rocky Beach Police Department right now,” Pete gasped, “as a janitor or gardener.”

“It fits his personality profile,” Bob added. “Palmer wants the thrill of being chased. He stages his crimes, allows himself to be hunted and challenges the police to a game. In the process, he is considered intelligent, manipulative and dangerous. He has even been investigated on suspicion of murder in two cases.”

“Okay, then I already know that I don’t want to meet him,” Pete said, “but apart from that, why is he playing his game with us of all people?”

“Probably because of this...” Bob looked at his notes. “Palmer was last seen in Rocky Beach a few years ago... and three guesses who almost caught him then?”

“Reynolds?” Pete said.

“Right. Palmer had injured himself on the run, but managed to escape and then went into complete hiding. I’m afraid he’s back now and wants to finish his game—with Chief Reynolds as the stake.”

Pete snorted. “Then he should challenge Cotta for that matter... but why us of all people? We don’t even officially work for the police!”

“If Palmer has been closely involved with Reynolds, he might know that we are friends with him,” Jupiter reflected. “I could imagine three teenage investigators being a change of pace for him. Playing a game with us, he’ll have to set the rules differently.”

“—And for us to take action like adult investigators, he sent us this equipment,” Pete concluded.

“I wonder what’s in store for us?” Jupiter thought bitterly.

4. Shackles & Chains

“Apart from Mitch Palmer telling us in his message that something is happening tonight, we’re not really any further ahead!” Bob sighed.

Pete, meanwhile, had cancelled a date with his girlfriend Kelly. She had not taken the cancellation very kindly. It was a fundamental problem that Pete didn’t quite know how to divide his time between sports training, school work, the investigation agency, and his girlfriend. Most of the time, he would forego school work—which had earned him summer classes.

“There’s no point in all this!” Pete slapped the flat of his hand on the desk where the note lay. “A date, a time—nothing more. It could also be an appointment in Hawaii or Canada or Timbuktu!”

“—Or we have to go to Chief Reynolds’s apartment,” Bob said.

“In fact, it can be just about any place that has to do with him,” Pete countered.

“We’re not getting anywhere like this, fellas!” Jupiter put on his gloves again and held the piece of paper against the light. “I wonder why the writing is pushed so far up to the edge of the paper—as if Palmer wanted to leave room for something else.”

With those words, Jupiter had disappeared into the small lab, which was separated from the office by a door. There he rummaged in one of the cupboards.

“What are you up to?” asked Pete, who now also entered the lab.

“I’m looking for a hidden or coded message.”

“You could have done that earlier!”

“Oh yeah?” Jupiter replied indignantly. “Who has thoroughly examined everything for traces? Not you, Pete!”

“That’s all right. I’m just unhappy with the overall situation.” Pete lit the Bunsen burner. “—But let’s see if the note reacts to heat and light.”

“Careful!” Jupiter grabbed Pete’s arm. “Don’t burn the clue!”

“I know what I’m doing! After all, I’ve been working with you for the last few years.”

Now Bob also squeezed into the narrow space. “So, have you got anything yet?”

“Nothing so far, unfortunately... but I’ll also do the UV light test.” Jupiter pulled an ultra-violet lamp out of a drawer. Then he shone it over the paper. “If this doesn’t do anything, we’ll have to consider chemical methods.”

“No, wait! There’s something there!” shouted Bob excitedly.

“Let me see!” Pete pushed Bob aside.

“That’s a stamp!” Jupiter exclaimed. “You get one of these on your hand at the entrance of some clubs. It’s invisible, but can be made visible with a UV lamp.”

“I know it,” Pete said. “They have this at discos too.”

Jupiter took a photo with a digital camera. Then he loaded the image onto their computer. Now all three of them could look at the stamp—a circle in which the words ‘SHACKLES & CHAINS L.A.’ were written in capital letters.

“So we’re probably really dealing with a club or a disco. Have you heard of this place?”

As they both shook their heads, Jupiter sat back down at the computer and entered the name into the search engine.

"That must be it!" Pete pointed to the top search result.

"So it's a nightclub in Los Angeles," Bob remarked.

"Why not?"

"How are we supposed to get into a club like that at one o'clock in the night?" Bob thought aloud. "The law prohibits underage youths from patronizing such places."

"We are no longer underage youths!" Pete held up one of the fake driver's licences with a grin. "Remember? These things are really starting to make sense now."

Bob rubbed his forehead as if he had a headache. "I don't like it! You really have to draw the line somewhere!"

"I agree with Bob," Pete said. "There are lines we as investigators shouldn't cross."

"I know, but don't forget what it's all about," growled Jupiter. "Palmer makes the rules and we have no choice but to play the game."

"I can't leave the car here!" said Pete for the third time as he parked his MG near Shackles & Chains. "This area is a magnet for criminals."

"Now come on." Bob was getting impatient. "Do you have your fake IDs with you?"

Pete held up the driver's licence. Jupiter also pulled the plastic card out of his pocket. "Let's not waste time!"

Shackles & Chains was located in a grey concrete building in a particularly desolate side street. A line of people was queuing to be admitted. There were also some people standing outside to smoke. Most of them were dressed in black. One woman wore a spiked dog collar. A man had put in contact lenses that mimicked lizard eyes. Muffled basses boomed towards them from inside the club.

The Three Investigators queued up with mixed feelings. A muscular bouncer in an anthracite suit eyed each of the newcomers critically. When it was the boys' turn, he gruffly asked them to show their IDs. Bob looked very nervous, and Pete hoped fervently that he would not blush. The Second Investigator was sure they were about to be found out.

"Hmm..." grumbled the bouncer.

Pete forced himself to smile and breathe in and out calmly. He should not grin traitorously or even blink exaggeratedly!

"Yeah, okay!" said the bouncer after half an eternity and waved the boys through. They paid the entrance fee at the cash desk, got the invisible stamp on their right hand and then stepped inside the club.

Shackles & Chains was a gloomy, crowded and overheated place. Movie clips were projected on the high walls, dancers moved in some cages at the edge of the dance floor.

"What now?" asked Bob, perplexed.

Jupiter looked at his watch. "It's a quarter to one. Fifteen minutes to go until the specified time."

"I wonder what Palmer is up to." Pete looked around.

Jupiter pushed his way between two women dressed all in black with heavily made-up eyes. "We'll find out soon, I hope."

"Well, let's just stand around then." Bob stared at the dancers.

"I hate discos!" said Jupiter, but because of the loud music Pete and Bob couldn't hear him.

Again and again, The Three Investigators stretched to look at the faces of individual people in the crowd. Palmer was obviously not among them.

Finally, Jupiter pointed at his watch. It was one minute to one.

Nervously, Pete looked around. There were dancing people behind him, beside him and in front of him, but no sign of the abductor.

The next song started. Instead of the video clips on the walls, a single photo was now shown. On it was a man wearing an unfashionable coat.

Pete thought that the image did not fit in with the rest of the video clips. In contrast to the performers in the videos, the man was fully dressed. He was even wearing a colourful patterned tie, which must have been out of fashion since the early nineties. Beneath a light brown moustache, the man had his mouth twisted into a broad smile. He looked like a salesman who had just successfully sold a vacuum cleaner.

“Someone must have been fiddling with the video projection!” Pete yelled into Jupiter’s ear.

However, the First Investigator just stared stunned at the image. “That’s him!”

“What?”

“That’s Palmer! Definitely! It’s a different photo from ours, but I’m one hundred percent sure!”

“You’re right!” Pete could have slapped himself that he hadn’t noticed that! After all, they had seen the photo from the envelope.

“If he can throw his image on the walls, he has access to projection room! Where is it? Come on, maybe he’s still there!” Jupiter spun around frantically.

The Second Investigator also began to scan the large hall with his eyes. Where was the image projected from?

“Up there!” Pete pointed to a large glass pane four metres above the dance floor. Behind it was obviously a room. A man in a long black coat stood behind the pane.

“Is that him?”

“We have to get up there!” Jupiter pushed his way between the dancers. The Three Investigators were barely making headway in the crowd.

“Faster!” shouted Bob redundantly.

It took them several minutes to even squeeze through to the exit that led to the toilets and a door marked ‘PERSONNEL ONLY’.

“He’s probably long gone by now!” said Bob, while Pete turned the knob of the door. It was not locked. Behind it was a narrow staircase.

One after the other, they ran up the steps. Luckily, no one was there to stop them.

“There on the left!” Pete shouted, and was the first to arrive in the projection room. From up here, one had a clear view of the dance floor through the large window. There was a mixing desk, a lighting system and several shelves with equipment.

Bob was about to say ‘There’s no one here!’ when he bumped his foot against something lying on the ground. Startled, he jumped back a step.

A man was lying in front of him—face down.

5. Another Message

“Someone must have knocked him down,” Jupiter said after feeling the man’s pulse.

“Better call for help,” suggested Pete, who was kneeling on the floor next to the First Investigator. “He’s bleeding from the forehead! And the wound looks anything but harmless!”

Suddenly, Two tall men in dark suits came into the room. They carried guns in their hands and each had a wireless earbud in their ear.

“What are you doing?” the taller of the two men said. “Visitors are not allowed in here!”

“We... er...” Bob stammered.

“What happened to Mike?” The man stepped forward and pointed his gun at the unconscious technician. “What have you done with him?”

“Someone attacked him here!” Jupiter said. “We missed the culprit, though.”

“Don’t tell me tall tales!” The man walked straight up to the First Investigator. “So what really happened here?”

“From down there, we saw a suspicious person at this window. We ran up here and then found this man on the floor.” Jupiter was getting impatient. “—And as we speak, the culprit escapes.”

“I’ll call the police, Dimitri!” said the second man, who was still standing in the doorway.

“Nothing doing!” said Dimitri sternly. “The boss won’t like it if the cops show up here. We’ll settle this ourselves!”

“You should at least call for an ambulance!” said Bob hesitantly. “Your colleague Mike seems to be badly injured!”

“He needs urgent attention!” affirmed Jupiter.

As if in confirmation, a muffled groan sounded from the technician. He moved a little.

“Wait!” Bob bent down to help him up.

“Don’t move!” Dimitri snapped at him.

“Then you help him up,” Bob replied a little more irritable than intended.

“Uhh...” Mike turned his head to the side and blinked. Then he mumbled distraughtly: “What... who... what?”

“Who was that, Mike?” asked Dimitri, without taking his eyes off The Three Investigators.

“Why don’t you let him sit up first,” Jupiter interjected.

“You shut up, fatso!” hissed Dimitri. “If anyone talks, it’s Mike.”

“It... was... a... man.” Mike leaned back against a wall.

“Can you describe him?”

“An elderly guy. Maybe fifty... I think... but... I don’t know... I feel so dizzy.”

“And what about these three?” Dimitri pointed the gun at The Three Investigators.

“I don’t know. Never seen them before.” Mike groaned. Carefully he felt for his forehead. Some blood dripped onto his T-shirt. “Is it bad?”

“You’ll live.”

At that moment, another man entered the room. He was tanned, also wearing a dark suit, and had a chunky gold chain around his neck. Just like the other employees of the club, he looked like an actor from a badly made Mafia movie. If the situation hadn't been so serious, Jupiter would have laughed out loud.

With a glance, the newcomer eyed the boys, then turned to Dimitri and his colleague. "Call Doc O'Neal. Tell him to take care of Mike... and as to these three," he pointed at Jupiter, Pete and Bob, "you let them go!"

"But sir..." Dimitri wanted to object.

However, the man with the gold chain silenced him with a curt wave of his hand. Then he smiled coldly at the boys. "Get out of here!"

The Three Investigators did not need to be told twice. Only when they were standing outside the entrance of the club did they pause.

"What was that all about?" Pete tapped his forehead. "Those were somewhat like Mafia methods!"

Jupiter did not answer. He stared down the street with a serious face.

"What is it, Juve?"

"You're still asking that, Pete? Palmer got away! Now we have a problem!"

Bob looked at his friend in horror. "Fellas! What's going to happen to Chief Reynolds now? I mean, Palmer isn't going to—" He did not dare say what he feared.

"The game just can't be over yet!" said Pete emphatically. "Look at this!" He held out his right hand to his colleagues. On it lay a crumpled piece of paper.

"What's that?" asked Bob in surprise.

"I really hope this is the next clue," Pete said, "otherwise it's just rubbish!"

"And where did you get that?"

"This was right next to Mike on the floor," Pete explained. "I picked it up before the first two guys came in."

Jupiter took the paper. On it, someone had written numbers and words in pencil:

NVSR372, NVSR160.

On a circle 230 m from the beginning of rain dance.

15th June, 12:30 am.

P.

"'P'," the First Investigator read aloud. "Looks like this is indeed a message from Palmer!"

Bob exhaled in relief. "Thank goodness, the game goes on!"

"Game?" echoed Pete. "This message is yet another tricky puzzle! And I'm not in the mood for any more of them!"

"But we are good at deciphering puzzles!" Jupiter countered.

"Oh yeah?" Pete walked off, heading for his car. "—And if we solve this puzzle wrong or too late, we'll have Chief Reynolds on our conscience!"

"There's nothing we can do for now but follow this trail," said Bob, who had now also started moving. "So let's go back to Rocky Beach and discuss how to proceed."

"I also think that is appropriate." Jupiter pocketed the note. "Apart from that, it is clear that Palmer wouldn't make it easy for us."

"Still, we should have caught him just now and found out where he had detained Chief Reynolds," Pete said.

“Sure, that’s how I feel too,” Bob replied, “but that could have ended badly for us. When Dimitri showed up, I was already expecting the worst.”

“An obvious fear under the circumstances,” Jupiter interjected, “but the man with the gold chain just let us go even though we were trespassing in the staff area. It wasn’t even clear what connection we had with the attack on Mike.”

“It was a bit strange,” Bob agreed.

“I don’t like it,” Jupiter said thoughtfully. “Consequently, there is still a huge chunk of the case that is unclear to us so far... but I think we should still concentrate our investigation on the message first. After all, our time allowance is limited.”

“This evening was really a flop!” Pete unlocked his car and got in.

“We just have to figure out where the message takes us,” Jupiter said as sat in the passenger seat.

“—Before we run out of time,” Bob added sullenly.

Jupiter tossed restlessly in his bed. The bass of the disco reverberated in his ears.

Although he was tired, the First Investigator could not sleep. In his mind’s eye he saw the images from Shackles & Chains—Palmer standing at the glass window above the disco dancing hall, the injured man on the floor, and the men in the dark suits. Again and again he thought of the message with the codes NVSR372, NVSR160, and so on.

The Three Investigators had not been able to decipher the puzzling text on the way back. All three had been too exhausted and had not had any good ideas. When they had finally arrived back in Rocky Beach, after glancing at the clock, they had decided to put their investigation on hold until the next day.

Now that he could think in peace, however, Jupiter had to admit to himself that they were hardly one step closer to saving Chief Reynolds. The helplessness was hard for the First Investigator to bear. Normally he knew exactly what to do. He usually found the solutions and made the decisions!

Jupiter pondered for a long time until he finally fell into a restless sleep. He dreamed that he was standing on one side of a road that led through a bizarre landscape of colourful rocks and shining trees. At first, he thought he was alone, but then he sensed that someone was standing diagonally behind him.

He turned around. It was Bob. He was wearing a dark suit with a chunky gold chain around his neck. On this right hand was a gun. On Bob’s left was a moustachioed man with glasses. He was wearing an old-fashioned coat. On closer look, it was Pete!

“You must save Chief Reynolds! He’s over there!” Bob pointed across the road.

When Jupe turned and looked across the road, he saw Chief Reynolds tied on a chair shouting: “Come on, show me your face, you scumbag!”

“I’m coming, Chief!” Jupiter cried.

“Wait!” Pete shouted. “You cannot cross that line!” He pointed to the road median.

In his dream, the First Investigator knew that he had to save the former police chief no matter what, so he decided to run across the road.

However the moment Jupiter stepped over the median, both his feet were rooted to the road surface. He tried to move towards Reynolds but had difficulty lifting his legs. It was as if there were weights attached to them. Eventually he only managed to put one foot in front of the other.

“You must save Chief Reynolds!” Bob repeated in a strangely low, echoing voice. The coloured rocks threw the sentence back as a distorted echo.

"I can't do it!" Jupiter cried as he struggled to take another step forward.

"I told you not to cross the line!" Pete called out.

Suddenly, the landscape around him seemed to dissolve into a colourless mist. When he looked around, Bob and Pete had disappeared.

"Jupe!"

The First Investigator startled. Aunt Mathilda was standing in the doorway. Sunlight fell through the gap in the curtains.

"You're going to be late for school!"

"Yes, Aunt Mathilda," Jupiter murmured. He tried to shake off the images of his dream.

"Is everything all right?" Aunt Mathilda stepped closer to his bed. "You're not going to get sick the day before the holidays, are you?"

"I didn't sleep that well."

"I can see that!" She looked at him reproachfully. "Titus and I noticed you sneaking off last night."

"I thought..."

"You thought you were quiet about it? Well, your uncle and I notice more than you think!"

"I have to go or I'll be late!" Jupiter jumped out of bed unusually nimbly and was about to dash to the bathroom when Aunt Mathilda stopped him.

"Is this something to do with a criminal case you boys are trying to solve again?" she asked.

"No! We don't have a case right now," Jupiter denied a touch too vehemently. "We... were out."

Aunt Mathilda snorted. "You'll have plenty of opportunities to do that during the holidays. Besides, we don't appreciate you sneaking off like that."

"Yes, I'll remember that in future." Jupiter didn't want to argue with his aunt. He looked at the clock. If he hurried with breakfast and left early, maybe he could talk to Pete and Bob before school.

However an hour later, the First Investigator was bored to discover that their investigation work would have to wait until the afternoon—Pete was immediately hogged by Kelly in the school corridor and Bob was late that day, of all days. So Jupiter had no choice but to clean out his locker alone while pondering the message.

"NVSR372, NVSR160," he muttered as he stuffed the many books, folders and files into his school bag.

He only realized he was talking to himself when three girls from the cheerleading squad started giggling loudly.

"Higher mathematics," he explained quickly, but the girls were no longer paying any attention to him.

Sighing, he threw two pens into his shirt pocket. If only he finally knew what this mysterious rain dance was all about!

6. Rain Dance

Fortunately, school ended early that day. As many students gathered around discussing and sharing holiday plans, Jupiter urged Pete to leave.

Pete hurriedly said goodbye to his sports buddies and followed the First Investigator out of the school. Bob was already waiting at the gate. A cluster of girls crowded around him, but instead of smiling charmingly as usual and engaging the girls in conversation, he looked tense and kept checking his watch. When Jupiter and Pete approached him, he was visibly relieved.

They cycled at top speed to the salvage yard. Although Jupiter was out of breath after the ride, without hesitation, he commenced the meeting at Headquarters.

“Do at least one of you have any idea what Palmer’s message might be about?” he asked after taking a seat.

“To me it looks like a place and time again,” Bob said. “Palmer will tell us where and when we can catch him next time.”

“Actually, it should be a police station,” Pete thought, “at least, if you go by his personality profile!”

“I know what you mean, but we’re not policemen,” Bob objected. “In our case, it would make more sense for Palmer to show up at the salvage yard or at our school.”

“They could just as easily be places that have something to do with Chief Reynolds,” Pete suggested.

“And why did Palmer lure us to Shackles & Chains in Los Angeles, of all places?” Bob wanted to know. “The nightclub has nothing to do with us or Reynolds, does it?”

“I’ve already thought about that,” Jupiter replied. “I still don’t understand the significance of this, even after careful consideration. We have never been to Shackles & Chains before and have never solved a case that was even remotely connected with the club. Yet it seems to me that Palmer leaves nothing to chance in his perfidious game. He must have chosen that place on purpose... possibly because Reynolds almost caught him there once before.”

Bob looked at his colleagues with resignation. “Too bad we can’t ask Chief Reynolds.”

“We should really concentrate on the next message now!” Jupiter put the note on the desk.

““NVSR372, NVSR160. On a circle 230 m from the beginning of rain dance. 15th June, 12:30 am’,” Bob read aloud.

“NVSR and then a number for each. Somebody should be able to figure that out,” Pete muttered sullenly.

“Maybe it’s a code where the numbers stand for letters and vice versa,” pondered Bob.

“But that doesn’t fit with the rest of the text, does it?”

“So ‘230 m’ must mean two hundred and thirty metres. That would be something to start with.”

“You mean two hundred and thirty metres within a rain dance venue is where we meet—and that’s tonight at half past twelve?”

“Rain dance...” Bob turned to his friends. “Then maybe we’re dealing with an Indian reservation.”

Jupiter didn’t look very happy. “—But there are far too many of them in the US. The chances are slim that we’ll find the right one, of all things.”

“Besides, we only have a few hours left!” Pete said. “We really have to hurry!”

“In any case, it is clear that we cannot help with the unloading today. The hunt for Palmer comes first!” Jupiter stood up. “I think I’d better talk to Aunt Mathilda right away. The thunder will only get worse later.”

“We’ll hold the fort here until then!” promised Bob.

“You’ll do fine, Jupe,” Pete said, deep in thought. He stared at the piece of paper again and mumbled the text to himself.

“We know the message by heart now!” said Bob when Jupiter had left the trailer.

“—But that doesn’t mean we can figure it out. We really need a flash of inspiration.”

“That’s usually Jupe’s speciality,” Bob said.

“The clock is ticking!” Pete pointed to the clock on the filing cabinet. “So what could the letters and the numbers stand for?”

“Possibly for coordinates?” Bob pondered. “For entries in a list? For house numbers? Or is it a code after all?”

Pete stroked his chin. “For what? If we are to look for a place, surely this would refer to a town, and then perhaps a street and a house number.”

“So a place called ‘Rain Dance’? It might even exist.” Bob hurriedly booted up the computer. He tapped impatiently on the table top with a pencil until the device was finally ready for use.

“So?” Pete asked after Bob had entered his search term.

“It’s hard to believe, but there’s not a single place called that in the whole of the US,” he replied, disappointed. “Instead, there seems to be a whole series of streets called ‘Raindance’—Raindance Drive, Raindance Street and Raindance Road.”

Pete now also looked at the screen. “They are in Texas, Arizona, Nevada, Georgia and California.”

“Then it probably means a road here in California,” Bob speculated. “We definitely wouldn’t make it to Georgia by car by 12:30 am.”

“A road,” Pete muttered. “Wait a minute!”

“What is it?”

The Second Investigator jumped up.

“Well tell me!”

“Wait!” Pete plucked the street directory from the shelf and leafed through it. Suddenly he paused and beamed. “There you go!”

“Don’t be like Jupe. Just show me what you’ve found.”

“Pahrump.”

“Pahrump?”

“A place where two major roads intersect! State Route 372 and State Route 160—also known as SR 372 and SR 160 for short! And NV is the abbreviation for Nevada.”

“Of course!” Bob snapped. “Pete, you’re a genius!”

The Second Investigator looked at the directory again. “Pahrump is in southern Nevada, near Las Vegas, and very close to the border with California. Via Interstate 15, we can be there in a little less than six hours.”

“Give me that!” Bob took the directory from Pete and sat down at the computer again.

Shortly afterwards, his expression brightened. "Pete, guess what? There's a Raindance Drive in the middle of Pahrump! Jupe will be proud of us!"

Bob was proved right.

"A very pleasing cognitive achievement indeed!" Jupiter praised his two friends after they had brought him up to speed a few minutes later. "If you displayed such intellectual prowess at school, Pete, I guarantee you wouldn't have summer classes on your hands."

Pete grinned wryly. "You don't have to remind me of that! I know I have to be at school on Monday. Anyway, we should be back from Pahrump by then."

"We don't know how many other stops we still have to go to get to Palmer," Jupiter interjected, "but first of all, we should concentrate on organizing the journey to Pahrump."

"It's gonna be six hours of driving," Pete said. "Another thing we have to be prepared for is that all three of us should be fresh to tackle this case because there are so many unknowns at this moment."

"It'll take us ages by intercity bus—if there's a bus to Pahrump at all," Bob said, "and if we don't find Palmer there, we're totally stranded without a car."

"Fortunately, we have other means of transportation at our disposal," Jupiter reached for the telephone. "I'll call Rent-'n-Ride now."

The Three Investigators had solved a case for a rich client at the very beginning of their investigation career. As a gesture of thanks, the client had promised to provide them with a car if needed. So Jupiter, Pete and Bob could always book a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce with gold trimmings at the Rent-'n-Ride Auto Agency. They had always asked for Worthington, the company's English chauffeur. Having driven them many times in the course of their investigations, Worthington had become a good friend to them.

This time too, Jupiter hoped for the help of the friendly Englishman, but luck was not on his side.

"Booked for a fortnight?" he asked disappointedly when the auto agency's clerk had checked Worthington's roster.

"I'm afraid so, sir. Our two other chauffeurs are also already fully scheduled this weekend, Mr Jones."

When the First Investigator hung up, he exhaled deeply. "I'd say we only have one way to get to Pahrump in time... is your MG geared for it, Pete?"

"Sure," Pete replied. "I've just got it serviced last week so it's as good as can be. The only thing is that the service cost me a bomb, and now I don't have much money to go on this long trip."

Bob opened a locked desk compartment and took out the bank card of The Three Investigators—a card they could use to pay on the road. "We have just under \$200 in the bank," he said. "That's not much, but it should be enough for two or three cheap motel nights and petrol."

"Anyway, Pete," Jupiter said, "if necessary, we'll take turns to drive. How about it?"

"It's okay," Pete replied. "I can handle it."

"Why not we pack our things quickly and meet back here in an hour," Jupiter decided. "We have to leave immediately if we want to be in time for our appointment with Palmer."

"Fine, and what are we going to tell our parents?" asked Bob, who felt a bit caught off guard.

"Think of something," Jupiter said absent-mindedly. The First Investigator was already tearing open the drawers and gathering the investigation equipment of The Three

Investigators.

7. On the Road

As agreed, about an hour later, Pete steered his MG out of the salvage yard. First he drove through the viscous city traffic of Los Angeles. The air shimmered over the road surface in the afternoon heat.

Jupe turned on the radio and Bob stared out the window. Instead of the usual music programme, a segment about the latest Hollywood movies was on. A clip was played and a sad female voice said: "You have chosen the path of darkness. From now on there is no turning back!"

"This is depressing!" Jupe hurriedly turned the knob that changed the station. There was a short crack, then The Three Investigators heard the newsreader of Radio KPFK: "... has been sentenced to two years in prison for fraud in several cases."

Hurriedly, Jupe kept turning until he found a station that played music. It was oldies, but the First Investigator still preferred that to gloomy prophecies and reports about fraud.

It took an hour for the traffic on Interstate 10 to slowly become smoother. Meanwhile, the song *Stuck in the Middle with You* was playing on the radio. The air conditioning blew noisily against the summer heat. Bob had to yawn more and more often. None of them felt like talking.

At least they were moving a little faster now. Pete steered the car east past the towns of Pomona and Ontario until they came to the interchange to turn into Interstate 15.

The landscape that whizzed past them was quite monotonous. There were wide, sandy expanses of low, dry brush, single Joshua trees, utility poles, lonely petrol stations and a few roadside restaurants. The Three Investigators already knew the route from a past case that had taken them to Zion National Park via Las Vegas. This time, however, they would turn north well before Las Vegas and take an unfamiliar route along the edge of Death Valley to Pahrump.

When Bob looked around after an hour's drive on the interstate, he paused. "I'm not entirely sure, but it could be that we've been followed since Rocky Beach."

"What?" Pete involuntarily stepped on the brakes.

"Drive on!" Jupe decided although he became nervous and now looked around as well.

"There's a green car that came up behind us two or three times in Los Angeles," Bob reported. "I didn't think anything of it at first, but now he's been behind us for so long and he hasn't tried to pass us once."

"That doesn't have to mean anything on this busy track," Jupiter replied, "but it would be good if you kept an eye on him anyway, Bob. Can you tell us more about the car and the driver?"

"Wait a minute." Bob stared strained at the road behind them. "It's a green Dodge Challenger!"

"What year of construction?" Pete asked immediately.

"I don't know, it looks like it's from the eighties. I don't know cars like you do, Pete. Anyway, it looks like there's only one person in it."

"Palmer?"

"I can't see the face from here."

“For the time being, we can’t do anything about it,” Jupiter said, “but eventually, we’ll know whether it has anything to do with our case.”

Pete looked thoughtfully through the side window at the vast expanses of sand that stretched beside the highway. “Does that make any sense at all?”

“What?”

“Well, that we are being followed in our pursuit of Palmer!”

Pete stepped on the accelerator—as far as the speed limit allowed. “It could be that Palmer has hired someone to monitor us... or he himself is following us instead of driving ahead.”

During the next hour, Bob kept looking around. When they reached the edge of the Mojave Desert, the other car could only be seen as a dark blur in the distance. Bob could barely make it out.

“Assuming it really is a pursuer,” Jupiter said, “then he has to keep his distance.”

In fact, it was hard to remain undetected on Interstate 15. The road ran dead straight through the plain.

When The Three Investigators were thirsty and tired from the drive, they took a break at a rest area. The yellow-painted building stood in a car park in the middle of nowhere.

Pete parked the MG next to an old truck and entered the restaurant through a side entrance. It was as good as empty. When the waitress saw the boys, she quickly stubbed out a cigarette in an ashtray and smoothed out her apron.

After the door had fallen back into the lock behind them, The Three Investigators knew why no one was in here unnecessarily long. Apparently the air conditioning was not working properly, because the air was hot and stuffy. An old fan rotated noisily under the ceiling, but hardly brought any cooling.

Anyway, the boys sat down at one of the tables and ordered hamburgers, sweet potato wedges and cold drinks. The waitress had just served them their food when the green Challenger drove through the car park and turned onto the highway.

“So our pursuer followed us here as well!” Pete looked out of the window, puzzled.

“We should have kept a better eye on the road,” Jupiter noted contritely. “He probably drove into the car park while we were engrossed in the menu.”

“Do you think he wanted to spy on us? He couldn’t possibly have eaten something in that short time and there’s no kiosk outside either.”

Bob speared a piece of sweet potato on his fork. “Maybe he was just using the toilet.”

“Possibly,” Jupiter said. “In any case, he’s moved on now, and that basically speaks against us being followed. Maybe it was just a coincidence that he was behind us the whole time.”

They hurriedly ate their food, paid and were back in the MG shortly afterwards. The interior of the car had heated up like an oven.

“I miss our little coastal town already,” Pete said, glancing at the evening desert landscape.

As if the radio was adapting to its surroundings, the ominous melody of a harmonica sounded at that moment. After the first few notes, Pete realized that it was *Play Me the Song of Death*—the soundtrack from the western movie *Once Upon a Time in the West*.

“The radio hates us!” he remarked. “I’ll take that as a very bad omen!”

8. At Pahrump

When The Three Investigators arrived in Pahrump, it was almost dark. They had not seen the green Challenger since their stop at the rest area. The rest of the drive had been uneventful as well. Bob had tried to sleep in the back seat but had failed.

The boys looked for a cheap motel on the highway, just outside Pahrump. It was a rather run-down, flat building standing lonely on the edge of the desert. The car park was dusty and almost empty. There was a simple pool with three illuminated artificial palm trees and a few outdoor chairs with peeling paint.

“Welcome to nowhere!” said Pete as he unlocked the motel room.

It was a bare room with a small television, a broken fan and faded colour photos of ships. In one corner, there was a wide built-in wardrobe with badly cleaned mirrored doors. The large double bed was covered with an old-fashioned flowered bedspread. On it lay a well-worn folder with the inscription ‘Welcome to Pahrump—Sunny Days & Western Ways!’ and a map with tourist information.

Pete peered into the attached bathroom. It was windowless with a flickering fluorescent tube above the sink. “A real five-star hotel,” he remarked.

“It’s half past nine now,” Bob noted, glancing at the digital alarm clock on the bedside cabinet. “That means we have three hours before we meet Palmer—if we get to meet him.”

“However, we still have no idea where exactly we need to go!” Jupiter said.

“Let’s just go to Raindance Drive and find out,” Pete said. The other two agreed with him.

A few minutes later, they were already back in the car with Bob at the wheel.

“Until the sixties, there wasn’t even a telephone in Pahrump,” Jupiter explained as Bob drove down the deserted road into Pahrump. “In the meantime, the infrastructure of the place has grown a lot and there is a high school, casinos, a public swimming pool and one or the other tourist attraction. Still, I wonder why Palmer led us here of all places.”

“True,” Bob agreed with him. “Just like the nightclub in LA, there seems to be no connection to us or Chief Reynolds.”

“Who knows, maybe Reynolds used to work here?” said Pete. “—Or he has relatives here? Or friends?”

Bob put on the indicator and turned into a side street. “Why else would he have chosen Pahrump? After all, the place is only known for the fact that gambling and some other trades are not illegal here.”

“Gambling!” Jupiter’s gaze caught a sign on the side of the road advertising a casino. “That could be it. After all, Palmer’s hunt is practically a gamble for him! And we have to be older than twenty-one to go into a casino. That’s where the fake IDs fit in.”

“Do you think that’s what this is about?” Bob looked doubtful. “I think it’s a bit far-fetched.”

“Hopefully we’ll understand it better once we’ve had a closer look at the destination,” Jupiter said.

Bob drove the MG to a sparsely lit shopping street in the middle of Pahrump, which seemed deserted. From there, he turned onto the dark Raindance Drive. The street was in a moderately built-up area between large car parks, an outlet of a large fast-food chain, and a petrol station.

“There’s nothing here!” Pete said after Bob had driven up and down the road twice.

“The clue doesn’t say that our destination is right on Raindance Drive or on a street leading out from it. Palmer writes something about a circle.”

“—But where should we put the circle? 230 metres from the beginning of the road, the end of the road or the middle of the road?” Pete looked around helplessly while Bob parked the car. The Three Investigators got out.

“From the beginning,” Jupiter said. “That’s what it says in Palmer’s message.”

“And which end of the street is the beginning? I don’t see any house numbers here.”

“I took a tourist map from the motel. Maybe it will help us,” Jupiter said. “However, we shouldn’t study it out here. It’s too conspicuous. For simplicity’s sake, I suggest that fast food restaurant over there as our temporary headquarters.” The First Investigator pointed to a large white building with a red and white striped roof.

“Temporary headquarters?” Pete grinned. “Why don’t you say you’re hungry? Anyway, I’m not eating. From tomorrow, I’ll have to borrow money from you because I only have a few dollars left.”

A few minutes later, The Three Investigators entered the air-conditioned interior of the restaurant. Jupiter ordered three cups of lemonade. Then the boys looked for a quiet place behind an oversized advertising display.

The First Investigator spread out the map on the black plastic table. He looked at the scale and then tapped the sheet with his index finger. “There we are... and this...”—he traced a small circle with his finger—“should be the radius in which we should search.”

“There’s a cemetery! The Chief Tecopa Cemetery,” Pete remarked, “and there are two banks that are also in that area.”

Bob nodded. “—And several restaurants, fast food joints, a pharmacy, a casino and the Silver Henhouse—probably a pub or something.”

“A casino?” said Pete hopefully. “That would fit, wouldn’t it?”

“Everything and nothing fits.” Jupiter snorted. “Palmer could be robbing one of the two banks, waiting at the cemetery or at the Silver Henhouse at the appointed time—if he didn’t mean the pharmacy or one of the restaurants. There are only three of us and one car. We can’t possibly stake out all the places at once!”

“At least some of these places would have to be closed after midnight.”

Pete pulled a rolled-up tape measure out of his pocket. It was torn in some places and a bit creased. “Wait a minute.” He put the tape measure on the map and pushed it around. Then he took a pen and drew two circles. “Look, Juve, that should be pretty much 230 metres from either end of the road now. The only question is which is the beginning and which is the end. The first circle crosses three locations—a snack bar, the Silver Henhouse, and the cemetery. The second circle crosses only one location, and that is the casino.”

“Well observed, Pete!” Jupiter looked appreciatively at Pete’s circles. “In fact, only these four places come into question and with a bit of luck it could be that the snack bar is not open all the time. That in turn would narrow down the choice to exactly three possible meeting places!”

9. Stake-Out at Three Locations

Since the snack bar was actually only open until eleven o'clock, The Three Investigators agreed to monitor the remaining three locations.

At just before twelve, they went over the plan for the night one last time. Since Pete had refused to be alone in the cemetery, Bob had stepped in for him. Jupiter, on the other hand, wanted to take on the casino. He believed that Palmer would most likely visit this place. That left only the Silver Henhouse for Pete.

One problem was that they only had one car at their disposal. Finally, they had to make a decision and drew matches. Pete had the longest one.

"Then I'll drive you quickly to your observation posts now and then get to the Silver Henhouse on the double!" he said delightedly.

"You'd better not go at full throttle, Pete!" warned Jupiter. "If the police stop you for exceeding the speed limit, it could have bad consequences for Chief Reynolds."

"It's all right. I'll drive carefully," Pete promised.

He dropped Jupiter off at the casino and drove Bob down a long dark side street to a sandy path that led to the cemetery.

"Take care!" he said as Bob got out. "The area doesn't look very reassuring."

"I have my mobile phone with me for emergencies."

"Can you even get reception out here?"

Bob glanced at his display. "No, not a single bar."

"I don't like it." Pete looked into the darkness that stretched left and right of the road.

"We'd better keep watch in pairs."

"You would come to a cemetery at night?"

"I hate to do this, but I can't leave you here alone, can I? If Palmer comes, there's not much you can do against him."

"Don't worry," Bob assured him. "I think Jupe is right. If Palmer were to go to one location within the 230 metres, it's more likely that it's the casino. After all, he's in it for a game."

"That sounds reasonable enough, but be careful anyway."

"You too. See you later!"

"See you later!" Pete started the engine and drove off.

With mixed feelings, Bob strolled down the dusty path to the cemetery. As he did so, he kept turning around furtively, but no one followed him.

He reached the fence of the cemetery grounds without encountering anyone. Somewhere in the night, a coyote howled. Bob took a deep breath and then climbed over the fence. Careful not to make any unnecessary noise, he began to look around the grounds.

Chief Tecopa Cemetery was a typical desert cemetery—a little more than a sandy patch of land. Some graves were enclosed within mesh wire fences. Flowers or green plants were rare. Instead, there were a few stone sculptures, cacti of all kinds, and lots of crosses.

Shortly after midnight, Bob had found a suitable hiding place. He took cover behind a mound of sand that had been thrown up at the back of the cemetery. He just had to be careful

not to accidentally sit on a snake. Conscientiously, he checked the ground. Only when he was sure not to disturb any critters during its night's rest did he put down his backpack and sit down on the sand.

At the same time, Jupiter was standing in front of the casino. Despite the fake driver's licence, he had not been let in because he wasn't wearing a jacket or tie. Of all places, this provincial casino had a strict dress code! It was true that one could rent the necessary attire at the entrance area at exorbitant prices, but Jupiter had not had enough money with him. He had given Pete a large part of their cash for petrol and the bank card of The Three Investigators was in Bob's backpack. The First Investigator was annoyed that he had not considered all this. Now he could only hope that Palmer would go to one of the other two locations or had not yet entered the casino. Possibly he could intercept the man outside the entrance.

The First Investigator sat down on a concrete bollard in the car park. Here he would wait until something happened. Every now and then, visitors parked, got out and walked to the entrance of the casino... but none of them resembled Palmer.

As time went by, Jupiter became nervous. What would he do if Palmer actually showed up? Should he confront him and demand that he release Chief Reynolds? Or would he be able to catch him off guard in some other way? After all, Jupiter was not as athletic as Pete. Apart from that, Palmer was considered dangerous. So Jupiter had no choice but to sit on the bollard and wait, and if nothing happened here at the casino, Pete or Bob might have more luck.

Pete also thought hard about how he could recognize Palmer and what he would have to do then. Tentatively he entered the Silver Henhouse.

Warm, stale air hit him. The place was a cross between a trucker bar and a nightclub. The floor was sticky with spilled drinks. The reddish and greenish lights were so dim that Pete inevitably felt he was walking through a cave. Besides a bar, there were two pool tables, a small stage where people danced and a jukebox playing a gloomy country song.

"ID!" the bartender growled as the Second Investigator sat down on one of the bar stools.

Pete, who had already had to identify himself at the door, held out the fake driver's licence to the bartender and asked for a Coke.

"Why not milk?" The barman reached under the counter, unearthed a bottle and opened the cap. "Here!"

"Thank you." Pete took a sip. The drink was lukewarm. Cooling down would have been good for him.

A man ordered a beer and was then given a bottle from the fridge. Pete was briefly tempted to order a beer as well, but then he remembered that he had come by car. Besides, he needed his full powers of concentration. Palmer could enter the Silver Henhouse unnoticed at any time.

A glance at the dusty clock on the wall behind the counter told Pete that midnight had already passed. However, the Silver Henhouse seemed to be filling up only now. New guests came in every now and then. The Second Investigator kept looking around.

"That clock on the wall is ten minutes fast," a young woman said and sat down next to him. It was one of the dancers who had just performed on stage. She was wearing a cropped white top with pink hearts, faded denim shorts and big yellow plastic earrings in the shape of

stars. Apart from the fact that her clothes reminded Pete of an eighties TV series, she actually looked very nice.

The Second Investigator smiled politely at her. "Thank you."

She leaned against the counter. "The way you look at that clock so often, I'd think your fate depended on it."

"Uh, yes," Pete answered hurriedly and stared again at the door, which was just opening.

"I'm Cindy."

"Pete."

"Are you alone here in Pahrump?"

"No, why?" Pete thought hard about how he could get rid of the young woman. At the same time he tried to make out Palmer's face in the crowd of new arrivals. Could it be the man with the glasses and the full beard who had abducted Chief Reynolds? Or was it the man with the baseball cap and the big belly? Or the man with the cowboy hat, the goatee and the tinted glasses, who just threw a few coins into the jukebox and chose a song?

"You could buy me a beer first," Cindy said, looking at him challengingly.

"I have a steady girlfriend," Pete explained, quickly returning his gaze to the door.

"—But she's not here."

"No."

"Very good." Cindy did not let up.

"I'm here on business," said the Second Investigator steadfastly.

"Ditto," Cindy replied.

Pete took a deep breath. "Listen, I have nothing against you, but I just can't talk right now."

"Are you a cop?" she asked suspiciously.

"What?" He turned to face her.

"I asked if you're a cop!"

"Uh..."

"This is all legal here! We're not doing anything illegal."

"I'm not from the police," said the Second Investigator.

"Yeah, all right." She gave him another evil look and then turned to a man who had just ordered a drink from the bartender.

Pete felt for a moment like a lonely but thoroughly cool cop on duty. The only difference was that the Second Investigator did not carry a gun in a holster under his arm, but in his sports backpack—even if it was a toy gun—and of course he didn't have a badge either.

He was just about to consider whether Cindy had actually mistaken him for a policeman or was just joking, when he suddenly flinched. The song that was now blaring from the jukebox sounded familiar! Yes, he had heard it before—in the nightclub in LA! This was the song that was played at exactly the time when the image of Palmer appeared on the wall!

10. Attack in the Dark

The Second Investigator jumped up and almost knocked over his Coke. Hastily he threw a few dollar notes on the counter. Where was the man in the cowboy hat who had just been standing at the jukebox?

Pete searched the whole place. Then he hurried to the car park. Someone was just getting into an old Buick Skylark. He was wearing a hat and also matched the height and build of the man Pete was looking for.

The Second Investigator set off in a sprint, but the Skylark moved off before he had covered half the distance. The car then roared out of the car park.

Pete was unsettled. It was quite possible that this man had actually been Palmer... but it could just as well be that Palmer was still sitting in the bar and he had been following the wrong man.

Finally, the Second Investigator decided to go back to the Silver Henhouse and take a closer look at the jukebox. If it had been Palmer, he might have left a new message there.

By now, the song was about to end. Pete rushed to the jukebox and noted down the name and the performer of the song—*Living on Third Street* by Chrystal Dreamspell.

Was it perhaps a coincidence that the same song they had heard at Shackles & Chains started playing at 12:30 am? Strictly speaking, 12:30 am on the incorrectly set clock meant that the song was played a good ten minutes too early.

Then he looked around the jukebox for any message or clue, but there was nothing. Coloured lights wandered in an arc around a glass pane behind which the song titles were displayed. There was a wide selection of tracks, some of which were even from the current charts.

Pete was about to sit down at the bar again to order a second lukewarm Coke when he suddenly had an idea.

Bob yawned. Here in the silence of the dark cemetery at night, the minutes dragged on endlessly. The only diversion came from car headlights that appeared and disappeared on roads in the distance.

At some point, Bob began to just look at the starry sky. He was trying to match up a few constellations when an engine noise startled him. Bob raised his wrist to his eyes. The luminous digits on his watch showed that it was exactly 12:29 am.

The engine noise came rapidly closer, then died away. The resumption of silence pressed on Bob's ears. Then he heard soft footsteps. Someone was coming into the cemetery! It could only be Palmer! And Jupiter had been so sure that he was going to the casino!

Bob pressed himself closer to the pile of sand and tried to make out details, but all he saw were the indistinct outlines of a figure walking along between the graves. Was Palmer looking for a suitable spot to put his next clue? Or was it someone else? Was it perhaps the driver of the Challenger?

After several minutes had passed without anything happening, Bob took heart. If the dark figure was indeed Palmer, he couldn't just let him go again, nor could he follow him

inconspicuously since Pete had the car. There was only one option—he had to confront Palmer right there! At least the element of surprise would be on Bob’s side.

Bob silently counted to ten, then jumped out of his cover, leaped and knocked the dark figure to the ground before he could react.

“Hey! What—” a male voice began, but did not finish the sentence.

Bob blinked. He didn’t recognize the man, but he bore a distant resemblance to the photo of Palmer—only now he wore glasses and had a goatee instead of a moustache. Bob had no doubt—he had just taken Chief Reynolds’s abductor by surprise. The question was how long he could keep the man pressed to the sandy ground. Something would have to happen eventually.

Bob remembered that he had no mobile phone reception in the cemetery. How was he going to get help? Already the man was trying to get free. Although he was not particularly tall, he seemed to be quite strong.

“The game is over, Palmer!” Bob growled to gain time to think. “We played by your rules and won. Now, where is Chief Reynolds?”

Palmer looked puzzled for a moment and gave up his struggle. He looked up questioningly at Bob, who stared back steadfastly. Suddenly, Palmer had himself under control again. He acted surprisingly quickly and skilfully. With a jerk, he freed his arms and turned to the side at the same time. Bob struggled for his balance and lost precious seconds. Palmer then delivered a violent blow to Bob’s head. Bob did not lose consciousness, but he slumped to one side and dropped to the ground. Dazed, he realized he was being pulled up.

“I don’t think the game is over yet,” said a voice very close to his ear. “In fact, it has only just begun!”

Pete got out of his MG. The gate of the cemetery was locked at this hour, but that would not stop him. By now he was sure he was following the right man.

After he had noted down the name of the song from the jukebox in the Silver Henhouse, he had had the idea to look at the map of Pahrump again. Just like in the song by Chrystal Dreamspell, there was a Third Street here. Not only was it a good 230 metres from Raindance Drive, but it also led directly to the cemetery.

The Second Investigator locked his car and listened. Had he heard something just then? He paused in his movement. Was it Bob? Or Palmer? Pete hadn’t seen any Skylark, though the cemetery could possibly be reached by another access road from the other side. Palmer was certainly not so careless as to park right in front of the main entrance.

Before Pete could think about it further, an engine was started some distance away. The Second Investigator cursed. By the time he was back in his car and had driven once around the grounds, Palmer would be long gone. The man had slipped through his fingers again!

Still grumbling quietly, the Second Investigator decided to look for Bob first. He climbed over the fence and walked along the sandy paths. Pete had always found cemeteries eerie and this one had a particularly strange atmosphere. The night wind howled softly and kicked up dust. It almost sounded like a moan. Pete forced himself to suppress his fear and continue looking for Bob.

“Bob?” he called out timidly. There was no answer. Pete switched on his flashlight and let the beam of light dance over the rows of graves.

“—And then what?” the First Investigator asked.

Two hours later, Jupiter and Pete were sitting in their motel room.

“There was no one there!” Pete exclaimed. “How many times do you want me to repeat the story?” Pete sat down on a worn stool that stood next to the double bed.

Jupiter meanwhile kept looking hopefully out of the window towards the car park. However, there was no sign of Bob. They had tried to reach him on his mobile phone, but no one had answered. Then they had driven through Pahrump at night. They had searched the whole area around the cemetery—in vain. Finally, tired and dejected, they had driven back to the motel. In the bleak light of the overhead lamp, the situation seemed absolutely hopeless.

“At least we now know that Palmer is not the driver of the green Challenger, but a Skylark,” Pete said wanly after quite a while.

“He could have borrowed, rented or stolen the Skylark here in Pahrump,” Jupiter countered.

“No,” Pete objected. “Mitch Palmer drove away from the Silver Henhouse in the Skylark. However, when I left the bar a while later, the green Challenger was following me again. So the driver couldn’t have been Palmer.”

“You were followed again?” asked Jupiter. “Why didn’t you say so just now?”

“Bob’s disappearance seemed more important to me somehow,” Pete said, “but if you want to know for sure, I zigzagged through Pahrump on my way to the cemetery and managed to lose the pursuer. In any case, the Challenger did turn up at the cemetery a little later! And another thing—Bob was mistaken. The model is not from the eighties. It’s a first-generation Challenger, so it’s from the early seventies.”

“Whatever the model, our pursuer could still be working with Palmer.” Jupiter rubbed his eyes.

“Now what?” Pete threw himself onto the bed.

“We have no choice but to wait,” grumbled the First Investigator. “We don’t know what happened to Bob, and we haven’t received another message either.”

“Then let’s go to the cemetery again later in the daylight,” Pete suggested. “Maybe we’ll find something we missed tonight. Bob could have left a chalk question mark or something from his backpack or—”

“Backpack!” Jupiter turned abruptly to face the Second Investigator. All weariness had disappeared from his gaze. “Bob not only has some of our equipment with him, but also our bank card!”

Pete frowned. “It doesn’t matter, does it? Do you think Palmer robbed him and is now going to take all our money? And even if he did, the most important thing is that we get Bob back safe and sound.”

“—But if we want to help Bob, we need money! For example, to put petrol in your car, and to be able to pay for more nights here in the motel!” Jupiter pulled his wallet out of his pocket and looked inside. “Well, I still have about fifteen dollars on me.”

“I have ten or fifteen at the most.” Pete threw crumpled dollar bills, a few quarters and lots of dimes onto the bedspread. “After I dropped Bob off at the cemetery, my fuel gauge was already in the red zone. I had to buy some petrol before going to the Silver Henhouse.”

“I know, but now you only have eight dollars!” Jupiter counted his friend’s money.

Pete looked contrite. “What was I supposed to do? By the way, I did not have enough money for a full tank, so I just bought ten dollars worth of petrol. Also, I have to buy something to eat and drink there. I couldn’t know that we would be broke from one moment to the next.”

“Ten dollars more or less won’t make much of a difference,” Jupiter said, “but we have to pool everything we have now... and I’m afraid this won’t get us very far.”

“At least we paid for the hotel room in advance!”

“Too bad we don’t have our own bank cards with us,” Jupiter fretted. “We relied too much on our agency’s card!”

Pete picked up the coins from the bedspread. “So now what? We’re in the middle of the desert with no money and no Bob! All that’s really left for us is to call home to Rocky Beach and have some money sent over.”

“This could be disastrous for both Chief Reynolds and Bob. Palmer’s rules say we can’t involve your parents or my aunt and uncle!” Jupiter looked exhaustedly at the Second Investigator, then tugged the bedspread off the bed. “At least we still have a couple of dollars. We’ll sort out everything else later. We should at least get some sleep for three or four hours. Now I just can’t think of anything else to do.”

11. A New Clue

When the alarm clock rang, the sun was just rising over the desert landscape and illuminating the Nopah Range, a reddish-grey mountain range on the horizon. Now, in the light of the awakening day, the area looked even more deserted and the furnishings of the motel room even shabbier.

Lost in sombre thoughts, Pete stared out the window while Jupiter went into the bathroom to brush his teeth. He had just squeezed the toothpaste onto the brush when he heard a loud rumble next door, followed by a loud crash. With two great leaps, Jupiter was at the door, toothbrush still in hand. "What happened?"

"I just closed the cupboard door a little more firmly," Pete said meekly. He was standing in the midst of shards. The mirror on the cupboard was broken into countless pieces. It bordered on a miracle that the Second Investigator was unhurt.

"We have to report this to the reception!" he said nervously.

"This could set us back hours!" Jupiter looked at the damage his friend had done. "We don't have enough money to pay for the broken mirror... and it's going to take way too much time to come to an agreement with the motel manager on how to handle this differently. We better leave before anyone even notices!"

Pete wasn't quite convinced yet, but Jupiter patted him gently on the shoulder. "When we have solved the case, we'll contact the motel and sort everything out."

"Whatever!" Pete sighed. "So, any idea on how to proceed? Should we call Rocky Beach after all or rob a bank instead?"

"I've already thought about that. After all, there are several banks here and we have two toy guns."

"I was joking about the robbery!" cried Pete indignantly. "When I say things like that, I don't mean them! I never mean anything like that seriously! I'm not a criminal after all."

"I, on the other hand, do not joke when it comes to such plans," the First Investigator replied. "Our situation is unfortunately extremely difficult and we bear the responsibility for one, if not two, human lives—Chief Reynolds and Bob."

"That doesn't mean we can rob a bank! I'm not going along with it! This is another one of those hair-raising Jupiter Jones plans!" Pete was really getting into a rage. "Sometimes you clearly have a penchant for extreme, risky solutions, Juve! No wonder criminal geniuses like Victor Huganay or that gangland boss Grey want to take you on. If Bob were here, he'd be mighty upset."

"It doesn't have to be a bank," Jupiter defended himself.

Pete snorted. "No, probably a casino or several petrol stations will be enough for you... and while we're at it, we can burn them down too!"

"Why don't you let me first think about what options we have left, considering our meagre cash balance," Jupiter said irritably, "and by the way, I don't have the slightest ambition to get involved in criminal methods if I can help it."

Pete packed his stuff into his backpack. "Fine, now we'll make our way to the cemetery and keep an eye out for a new clue from Palmer."

Ten minutes later, Jupiter and Pete sneaked out from the room and made their way to the MG. Just before getting into the driver's seat, Pete noticed a little note stuck on the wipers.

"Jupe! Look! I think Palmer has given us the next clue. If so, we can save ourselves a trip to the cemetery!"

Pete got out of the car, took the note and then handed it to Jupiter. The note said:

Go to the place that is the biggest, yet little. At 8 pm, be at the house where black and white come together. There you bet everything on the red three. The prize is a whole Bob.

Faites vos jeux!

P.

Pete turned to his friend. "Palmer has Bob, that's for sure!"

"I think so too, unfortunately," Jupiter replied, "and he wants to lure us to a new place—another location nearby would probably be too easy. Before we find out where we have to go, we have to get out of here first!"

Pete started the car and steered it onto the road. There he stepped on the accelerator.

"Not so fast! Otherwise we'll have a highway patrol on our backs!"

"Oh no!" Pete said.

"What's wrong?"

"Petrol's low again," Pete exclaimed.

"I thought you filled it up?" Jupiter remarked.

"Not a full tank! I told you that I did not have enough money on me." Pete sighed. "I know why. I used too much fuel trying to shake off the Challenger when I was on the way to look for Bob. Then I also circled the cemetery many times."

"How far can we go?" Jupiter asked.

"Not much," Pete said, "hopefully to the nearest petrol station. Without money, we'll be stranded there anyway!"

"Then make your way there," Jupiter decided. "We'll figure out what to do then."

"You're not thinking of robbing the petrol station, are you?"

"Just go!" Jupiter insisted. "Get out of here before the motel manager comes after us."

Despite the early morning hour, the sun was already shining brightly.

Jupiter felt like he was on the verge of dying of thirst. In the morning, he had only drunk some water from the tap in the bathroom. Why hadn't he just filled up the empty plastic bottle and taken it with him? And neither of them had eaten anything yet.

"When you bought petrol yesterday, did you also buy something to eat and drink?" Jupe asked.

"Right! In my backpack," Pete replied. "I'm just afraid the chocolate-covered energy bars have melted a bit."

"Never mind, I need food," Jupiter replied, "otherwise my brain won't work at full speed." He snatched Pete's backpack from the back seat and found a shrink-wrapped chocolate bar.

"Drink?" Jupiter hurriedly tore open the package. "Whatever you have, I'll take it!"

"I have something that you might not want," Pete said.

"I'm thirsty and I don't care what you have," Jupe said as he searched Pete's backpack again and pulled out a can. "—And you lecture me about not doing anything illegal!"

"Well, I'm not the one here who necessarily wanted to break the law on a grand scale!" Pete defended himself. "I was just testing whether the people at the petrol station really

believe that my driver's licence is genuine."

"Yeah sure!" Jupiter snorted. "—And now you have a can of warm beer."

"Yesterday, how would I know what was going to happen today?"

"You could have bought Coke."

"Sure, I should have remembered that Coke is so incredibly healthy."

Jupiter closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again. "We shouldn't argue. Every minute counts now and the two of us have to stick together."

Pete agreed.

Jupe quickly gobbled up the chocolate bar and took a small sip of the beer. It tasted bitter and did not quench his thirst, but at least his tongue was no longer sticking so unpleasantly to the roof of his mouth.

"I've been thinking about the message from Palmer all along."

"Me too," Pete said, "but I haven't the faintest idea what he's trying to say."

"Since we don't have to be there until the evening, I'm going to assume that we still have quite a distance to cover—and that's to a casino."

"Great!" Pete remarked and took a look at his fuel gauge.

"Palmer wants to make the game more exciting. We just have to figure out how to handle this," Jupiter explained.

"Why does it have to be a casino?"

"Betting everything on the 'red three' seems to be a reference to roulette, where you can bet on numbers or colours. The French phrase '*Faites vos jeux*', translated as 'Place your bets', also fits in with this. This is usually said in the casino before the bets are placed."

"That doesn't help us right now," Pete said glumly. "We can't wait outside all the casinos in Nevada at the same time."

"That's true," Jupiter admitted, "but we can assume that the place is within a few hours' drive or bus ride from here. Besides, gambling is illegal in most cities in the US."

"Not here in Pahrump," Pete said.

"And not in Reno and Las Vegas either," Jupiter added. "It's more than six hours from here to Reno, but it only takes an hour to get to Las Vegas."

"And we have until eight o'clock."

"After all, the message tells us to 'go to the place that is the biggest, yet little'," Jupiter recalled. "Maybe we can find a library in Pahrump where we can find out more about the casinos in all the cities in question. Considering Bob's absence, we'll have to do our own research."

"I'm reaching the petrol station," Pete announced. "I don't think I can go much further."

Jupiter groaned. "Just go in and—" He broke off in mid-sentence and stopped.

"Jupe, what is it?" asked Pete, slightly dazed.

"Don't look too conspicuously to the right," Jupiter hissed. "Is that the green Challenger that's been following us. I'm quite sure of it!"

"Really?" the Second Investigator said, startled. He raised his hand over his eyes to see better. As he did so, he realized that he was dizzy from the buzzing air. The petrol station was moving back and forth, rocking slightly, like a slow camel. The Second Investigator blinked. Then he realized that he himself was swaying.

"Our pursuer must be in the petrol station shop right now to pay!" Jupiter exclaimed. "Stop the car right here, get out and come with me!"

Shortly afterwards, they noticed that the small shop was locked. It was one of those petrol stations that were not manned around the clock so one could pay by credit card directly at the pumps.

The driver of the car, however, was nowhere to be seen. Jupiter peered inside the Challenger.

"Looks like our pursuer spent the night in the car." He glanced at the back seat where there was a small device. "That there seems to me like a tracking device!"

"Now what?"

"I suspect that our pursuer went to the toilet." Jupiter pointed to a sign that was already half eaten away by rust. The lettering 'RESTROOMS' was still clearly legible though.

"Perfect. The toilets are behind the building!"

"What's perfect about it?"

Jupiter only put his finger to his lips. Followed by Pete, he circled the petrol station building. There were two blue doors at the back.

"What are you up to?" whispered Pete with a sideways glance at Jupiter, who had taken off his backpack as he walked and was just opening it.

"We'll overpower our pursuer here." Jupiter retreated into the shade of a large and rusty waste container filled to the brim with construction debris.

"Overpower?"

"Get up this container here and when I tell you, you leap down and knock him out!"

"What?" hissed Pete, startled.

"Don't argue, just do it!" Jupe whispered. "We don't have much time!"

As Jupe insisted, Pete lifted himself up the container and positioned himself on top of the debris. Despite the heat, he suddenly felt freezing cold—and nauseous. The muffled sound of a water flush could be heard through the closed door.

Then Jupiter signalled to Pete to get ready.

No sooner had he done that than events began to unfold. The blue door opened, the driver of the Challenger stepped out into the open and Jupiter jumped into his path with an unusually athletic leap.

The man flinched in surprise and involuntarily took a step backwards. He almost tripped over the step leading to the toilets. While all this was happening, Jupiter had already raised his toy gun and pointed at the surprised man.

"Hands up!" he said. When the man did as told, the First Investigator then yelled: "Now, Pete!"

12. Turning the Tables

Bob was lying on the back seat of the Skylark. His mouth felt dry and his head hurt. He felt strangely dizzy. "Can I have something to drink?" he croaked.

Palmer didn't turn around. "Later... when we take a break. We still have a long way to go!"

Bob groaned softly. His wrists hurt. His captor had tied him up, as if he could escape from a car speeding along a lonely highway. In a Los Angeles traffic jam, Bob could at least have signalled to other drivers. Someone would have noticed him for sure, but here, under the vast, cloudless Nevada sky, that was an almost impossible task. Now and then, a truck came towards them, once they were overtaken by a group of motorcyclists. Otherwise, not much happened. This gave Bob time to go over in his head the events of the last few hours.

Palmer had attacked Bob in the cemetery. Then he had dragged the unconscious Bob into his car, and drove to an abandoned motel. There he had gone through Bob's wallet and discovered the business card of The Three Investigators:



Palmer had burst into anger and questioned Bob about their investigation and their client. At first, Bob had kept quiet, but Palmer threatened him. The man had not looked dangerous at first glance, quite the opposite. He had been unassuming, with an average face and an almost sympathetic smile. However, Bob had quickly realized that the façade was deceptive.

Palmer had been unpredictable. His mood could change from one moment to the next. It got worst when he found the toy gun in Bob's backpack. Then he had threatened Bob with a knife.

Silence reigned in the car for two hours now. Bob thought about all the things he had asked Palmer, although the man had not answered. Bob had wanted to know why Palmer had lured The Three Investigators to Pahrump in the first place and now suddenly didn't even know who they were. How could their business card surprise him when he had deliberately given them the assignment to follow him and had even sent a package to them at the salvage yard? There had not even been a single word about Chief Reynolds at all.

Bob could no longer make sense of what had happened so far. He fervently hoped that Jupiter and Pete would find a solution. They simply had to save him and Reynolds!

On Jupiter's prompt, Pete hurled himself down from the waste container and rammed the back of the man with such force that it brought him down. The man landed with his face in

the sand and remained motionless.

"I'll keep him at bay while you go get the rope from your car," Jupiter told Pete.
"Quick!"

Without hesitation, Pete raced back to his car, and in less than a minute, he was back with a coil of rope. The two boys tied the man's wrists behind his back, and then his ankles. The man remained unconscious all the while.

"What now?" Pete asked. He still felt that slight nausea. This was the same feeling as that when he woke up, relieved to find that he had only been dreaming. However, this nightmare seemed to be most real.

"We'll search him!" ordered Jupiter, who was now clearly tense.

Both of them got down on their knees. Jupe patted down the driver of the Challenger and found a gun tucked in a holster under his left armpit. He took the gun out and laid it flat on the ground.

"He has the car key and a wallet in his pocket!" added Pete, pulling out the black leather wallet with two fingers.

"With a driver's licence?"

Pete flipped open his wallet. "Yes. His name is Stewart Rockford."

"Any other IDs?"

"No, only bank and credit cards."

"He's still out, but it will not be long," Jupe said. "Then we'll question him. Meanwhile gather all his things and come with me."

"Including his gun?" Pete asked.

"Yes, everything we got from him," Jupe insisted, "and come quick!"

Pete hurriedly bent down for Rockford's car key, wallet and gun. Somewhat awkwardly, he held on to the items and went after Jupe.

When the two boys was approaching the Challenger, the First Investigator stopped for a moment. "Give me his wallet," he told Pete. "Meanwhile you go to his car and search it."

"What are you going to do?" Pete asked when he saw Jupiter taking out the man's credit card.

"I'll be right back," Jupe said. "Oh yeah, I need your car key. I'm getting your MG a full tank of petrol."

"What?" Pete exclaimed. "You mean—"

"I know you won't want to do it, so I'm doing it instead," Jupe interrupted. "Meanwhile, if you want to help, you can search Rockford's glove compartment. Maybe we'll find a clue as to who sent him."

Reluctantly, Pete followed his friend's suggestion. Meanwhile, Jupiter went to the MG and drove it up to a fuel pump. Then he tapped Rockford's credit card on the contactless checkout reader and begin filling up the MG's tank.

After that, he joined Pete at the Challenger. The Second Investigator was still searching the glove compartment so Jupiter checked the back seat.

"What did you find in the glove compartment?" Jupiter asked.

"There is a mobile phone, a folded road map and a green plastic bag full of money."

"How much is it?" asked Jupiter tensely.

"Four hundred," Pete replied after counting the banknotes.

"Great! We can cover all our travel expenses with that."

Pete tapped his forehead. "Jupiter Jones, I really think you've blown a fuse. You probably have sunstroke or is dehydrated, but please!"

“Look, Pete!” Jupe began, hesitated and then said: “How about this? When we settle this case, we’ll make an attempt to pay him back every single cent. In the meantime, we have no choice as we are running out of time. Just take the money first, complete your search, and then we’ll go question him.”

A few minutes later, Jupiter put Rockford’s wallet and gun in the glove compartment, locked the Challenger and both of them made their way back to the man.

“He’s still out,” Pete noted.

“We’ll get him to talk,” Jupe said and handed Pete his toy gun. Then the First Investigator promptly went into the toilet and came back with a mug of water. He splashed the water onto the man’s face.

“Hey, you!” Jupiter called out. “Wake up!”

Jupiter managed to get the man to sit up with his back to the side of the building. A while later, he began to regain consciousness.

Jupiter squatted beside him. “Who do you work for?” he asked.

The man did not answer.

“So your name is Stewart Rockford,” Jupe said. “Tell us who sent you.”

“No one. I’m just a tourist.”

“You followed us here from LA!” said Jupiter coldly. “There is a receiving device in your car. You probably put a transmitter on our car, but that’s no use to you now.”

The man still remained silent. Maybe he was hoping that someone would happen to come by for petrol.

“Do you work for Palmer?”

“Who is Palmer?”

“Now don’t pretend you don’t know about all this!”

“As I said, I’m just a tourist.”

Jupiter snorted. “A tourist following us with a tracking device?”

“I have not been following you.”

“You better make sure you don’t blink too much when you lie.”

“I blink because of the sun.”

It went back and forth like that for quite a while. Pete preferred to stay out of the interrogation. He didn’t like the situation at all.

What would happen if the man was really just a tourist who had happened to be on the same route as The Three Investigators? Besides, the gun felt scary in his hands, even though it was only a toy.

“So you still claim to be a completely harmless tourist,” said Jupiter. “Your tracking device is enough proof that you lied to us.”

“So what?” the man growled. “As if you would shoot at me. You ridiculous would-be investigators don’t want to get into trouble with the police.”

“Just let us worry about that,” Jupiter said. “One last time—who sent you?”

The man slowly stretched his feet. “None of your business! Tell your friend to put the gun away before he hurts somebody!”

Pete saw that the gun was shaking slightly in his hands. Several scenarios were running in his head at the same time, but no matter what happened—they all ended in disaster.

“If you think you can beat the truth out of me, you’ve got another think coming!” Rockford said. “There will be consequences!”

“Okay, then you stay here!” Jupiter said and threw the Challenger’s car key on the ground. “The rest of your stuff is in your car... and don’t scream for help! No one will hear you out here anyway.”

“You’ll regret this!” Rockford shouted as the two boys ran off.

Both of them got into the MG with Jupiter in the driver’s seat.

“Let’s get out of here on the double,” Jupe said. “It won’t be long when someone comes along and releases Rockford.”

“What if he is a policeman—in plain clothes?” Pete exclaimed as Jupiter turned out from the petrol station and accelerated.

“Then he would have a police ID on him,” Jupiter replied, “and he would have tried to cooperate with us. After all, he knew we were investigators.”

“Okay, how about this,” Pete continued, “once someone frees him, he comes after us again. After all, you gave him back his car key and he has his receiver thing he used to track us.”

“Not anymore,” Jupe said. “I took his receiver. It’s in my backpack now.”

“In any case, we still stole money from him!” Pete burst out.

“—But there was no other way,” Jupiter added grimly. “It’s not like we stole his Challenger!”

“Stealing is stealing,” Pete said. “I still feel very uneasy about all this!”

“Listen...” Jupiter turned to Pete. “How many times do you want me to repeat it? Two lives are in our hands. We can’t call the police and we can’t ask anyone else for help.”

Pete waved it off. “Of course I know that, but with what we are doing right now, we could end up in prison, have a criminal record, and forced to give up our investigation agency once and for all.”

“Still I would prefer such a life to the certainty that a person had to die because of us,” Jupiter said quietly. “Pete, I can’t force you to follow me, but I will leave no stone unturned to save Bob and Chief Reynolds.”

“What if this Rockford guy runs straight to the Pahrump police and reports us? Then the cops will be after us!”

“No! The man is definitely dodgy. He’s got better things to do than draw the police’s attention to himself. He’s more likely to make contact with Palmer—or whomever his employer is!”

13. Black and White Come Together

“Where are we headed now?” Pete asked.

“I have to find out where we have to go in the first place!” Jupiter turned into a side street. After three hundred metres, he drove to a row of shops.

“Look, Pete, you hold the fort here. I’ll take care of the rest.” Jupiter got out and threw the car key to his friend. Then he marched straight towards a convenience store.

He opened the door, walked past the racks of newspapers, magazines and sweets and finally stopped in front of a shelf where there were souvenirs, postcards, and a few brochures. Most of them were directly related to Pahrump, but there was also a magazine about places of interest in Nevada. Jupiter flipped to the table of contents and discovered that there was an article on gambling that covered Las Vegas, Reno and Pahrump in detail.

Jupiter paid for the magazine, two bottles of water and four shrink-wrapped bagels with ham and cheese. He swallowed the strange feeling that came over him when he took out the wad of Rockford’s money. As much as he hated to admit it, what Pete and he were doing was definitely criminal. The fact that they had to save two lives did not change that. Jupiter thought feverishly about whether there was another way out, but nothing came to mind. Besides, they had already gone much too far. Turning back was no longer an option. It was almost like his dream with the road—he had crossed the line and now he couldn’t go back. When he thought about it, he felt sick to his stomach.

Shortly afterwards, Jupiter returned to the car and drove it away from the shops. He finally parked the MG in the shadow of an old warehouse on the northern outskirts of Pahrump. Here, the car was not visible from the road. He frantically leafed through the magazine he had bought at the convenience store.

“I hope I can find something useful in this... otherwise we’d have to look for the local library... and who knows when they’ll open!”

“Can’t you access the Internet on your phone?” Pete asked.

“Nope,” Jupiter replied. “I’ve tried. It was just too slow as the reception is bad.”

“What exactly are we looking for?” asked Pete.

“Wait...” Jupiter stared at the table of contents. “Las Vegas, Pahrump, Reno, page eight...” He turned the page again. Then he paused. His eyes flew over the text. Every now and then, he mumbled a word or two.

Pete yawned and closed his eyes. He was still tired from the short night. The stress of the last few hours and the heat were also getting to him. He had just dozed off when a loud “Aha!” from Jupiter startled him.

“What is it?”

“The biggest little city in the world!”

“What now?” muttered Pete sleepily.

Jupiter threw the magazine on his lap. “Reno is known as ‘The Biggest Little City in the World’. You know what I mean? ‘The place that is the biggest, yet little’?”

Now Pete sat up. “Right! Reno—that must be it!”

Jupiter, meanwhile, reached over and opened the glove compartment. He rummaged around in it and grabbed the map.

“It’s six and a half hours to Reno!” Jupe said.

“Then you’d better get going!” Pete said. “There’s no time to lose. Meanwhile, I have to take a nap. Drive carefully!”

Palmer stopped at a lonely petrol station next to the highway. He parked the car behind a pillar so that Bob could not be seen from the petrol station shop. Bob looked around hopefully, but far and wide there was no one to be seen.

Palmer got out, filled the tank and then locked the car. As soon as he was out of sight, Bob began to examine his shackles. Palmer had thankfully tied his wrists together in front of his body. After several futile attempts, Bob managed to grab the knot with his teeth, and tried to undo the knot. However, several minutes passed before anything moved. Palmer could return at any moment. If he managed to get rid of the shackles, he could possibly catch Palmer off guard while he was driving, force him to stop and then...

Bob’s thoughts were interrupted when a shadow fell on the car. Quickly he lowered his hands. Palmer unlocked the car and got back in.

“Here’s something for you to drink.” He held out to Bob a plastic bottle of water with a straw in it.

“Thank you.” Bob raised his bound wrists and grabbed the bottle with his hands.

Palmer said nothing in reply. He lit a cigarette and started the engine. The car rolled out of the petrol station and onto the endless country road. Where to, Bob could not tell. At least he finally had water! He drank half the bottle in one go. After that, his spirits returned for a brief moment.

At some point Palmer would have to stop again and then Bob might get another chance to escape. However, at that very moment, he noticed how tired he was becoming. His eyelids became uncomfortably heavy and the low hum of the car engine gave way to a crackling and hissing noise. Palmer had put something into the water!

Jupiter was fighting his tiredness. US Route 95 was a long, grey highway that led through a landscape that was always the same. On the radio, Bob Seger was singing *Turn the Page*—a fitting song about the ups and downs of a musician’s life on the road.

Jupiter recalled many of the cases they had been on. There had often been situations that had seemed hopeless, but at least The Three Investigators had been on the side of the law. As Pete had pointed out, what would happen if Rockford did go to the police? Jupiter was surprised that this idea did not frighten him. He noticed that he felt strangely light. The sinking feeling in his stomach was gone. They were practically outlaws. He and Pete could do anything they wanted. This knowledge was intoxicating—and dangerous. Jupiter called himself to order. He had to keep a cool head!

When the two took a short break and entered an overly air-conditioned highway restaurant, they had the feeling that everyone was turning to look at them. However, Jupiter told himself that it was just imagination. The few truckers, the waitress and the bald man at the cash register couldn’t know anything about the stolen four hundred dollars, the fake guns, and the fake IDs.

“We might need suits if we have to go into a casino in Reno,” said the First Investigator as they sat at one of the sticky tables hastily choking down their burgers. “Most casinos don’t have a dress code but with our luck, the one we have to go into requires us to wear a tie and jacket.”

“And where do we get them?”

“There are certainly such shops in Reno.”

“Then what? What are we going to do in the casino anyway? Bet everything on the ‘red three’?”

“That’s how it looks. So far we’ve been playing exclusively by Palmer’s rules,” Jupiter said bitterly.

Pete crumpled up his napkin. “He wants to prove that he has us in the palm of his hand.”

“That’s right.” Jupiter brushed his sweaty black hair out of his forehead. “—And you can imagine how much I dislike being reduced to a pawn.”

“Well, so far you’ve still fought back successfully,” Pete said in an attempt to cheer himself and his friend up a bit.

“That may be...” Jupiter looked thoughtfully at an amber-coloured computer that stood in an alcove of the restaurant. A faded sign saying ‘FREE INTERNET’ hung on the wall above it. A portly man with long hair, wearing black leather clothes despite the heat, was just getting up from the wobbly chair that stood in front of the computer.

“Finally!” Jupiter pushed the tray with the empty burger wrapper off him and jumped up. “This is our chance to find out more.”

“Do we have time for this?” Pete interjected as Jupiter took a seat in front of the computer.

“All haste is useless if we don’t know where to go in Reno.” Jupiter launched the Internet browser. The computer began to rattle. “My goodness, this thing is truly ancient... and the connection could hardly be worse... at least better than on my phone.”

It took a long time for the search engine home page to build up.

Jupiter entered the terms ‘Black’, ‘White’, ‘Casino’ and ‘Reno’. Then he pressed the ‘Enter’ key. Again the computer rattled.

“At this rate, we can get another milkshake at the counter,” Pete muttered impatiently.

“You’re welcome to do that.” Jupiter pressed a few dollars into his friend’s hand. “I’ll have chocolate.”

“That was just a joke.”

“Never mind. I’ll check the Internet until then.” Jupiter looked at the screen again, where not much had happened yet.

The Second Investigator strolled away resignedly. His watch told him that it was already after five. Time seemed to be racing. Besides, this Rockford could already be after them. Who knew who he was in league with? Pete would rather not meet him again.

“What do you want?” the young waitress asked.

“Two milkshakes—one chocolate, one banana.”

She nodded curtly and pointed to the paper cups in front of her. “Single, double or supersize?”

“Single will do.” Pete didn’t even really feel like drinking anything. If he had his way, this case wouldn’t exist—Chief Reynolds would be enjoying his holiday; Jupiter would be tinkering with technical equipment at Headquarters; Bob would be attending a rock concert; and he would be at the beach with his surfboard—maybe with his girlfriend Kelly. A fresh, salty breeze would cool him down and then the waves...

“There!” The young woman set the two cups down in front of him. Yellowish and brown liquid spilled over and ran down the sides of the cups. “Three dollars fifty-eight.”

Pete paid and carried the cups back to the computer alcove. Jupiter was frantically typing in terms. His cheeks were slightly flushed, and his gaze seemed feverish despite the Arctic temperatures in the restaurant.

“So is there a casino that has something to do with the colours black and white?” asked Pete.

“In a technical sense, black and white are not colours, they are shades,” Jupiter explained. “In additive colour mixing, white is a mixture of all three primary colours; and black is ultimately the absence of a colour stimulus.”

“Whatever! Then have you found a casino that has to do with the shades black and white?” the Second Investigator corrected himself.

“Indeed,” Jupiter confirmed, “and it was surprisingly easy! You see, in Reno there is the Black & White Casino.”

Pete handed Jupiter his chocolate shake. “It’s ‘the house where black and white come together’—at least in the name!”

“You said it.” Jupiter took a sip. “—And there’s something else I noticed. In fact, you made me think of it.”

“Think of what?”

“What do you get when you mix black and white?” asked the First Investigator.

Pete thought for a moment. “Grey?”

“Very true—grey. That’s what the destinations have in common,” Jupiter said. “Just think of the Silver Henhouse—the colour silver.”

“But silver is not grey.”

“There is a strong visual resemblance though!”

“That may be so,” Pete interjected, “but what can we conclude from that?”

“We have been asking ourselves all along what this game has to do with us and Chief Reynolds. The answer to that is—nothing!”

14. Nevada Outlaws

Pete laughed out. “Nothing? But Jupe, we are trying to get this Palmer for hours. We saw the video with the abducted Chief Reynolds ourselves! And we got the package with the IDs and the weapons from Palmer!”

“We have merely concluded all that from the facts at hand,” Jupiter corrected, “but I fear that there are not two groups involved in this game, but at least three.”

“You assume all this because two of our targets have something to do with the colour grey?” Pete raised his eyebrows doubtfully. “—And now don’t tell me that grey is not a colour.”

“Look!” Jupiter pointed to a website. “See who the owner of the Black & White Casino is?”

Pete bent down and read: “William M. Grey.” Immediately his eyes snapped open. “Oh no! Not him!”

“Yes, unfortunately,” Jupiter confirmed. “It’s the one and only William M. Grey—otherwise known as ‘Moriarty’.”

The Three Investigators had met William M. Grey in a previous case. Confined to a wheelchair, Grey was a very dangerous and intimidating gangland boss. In that case, Grey had not only been inspired by the fictional Professor James Moriarty, the arch-enemy of Sherlock Holmes, but he had referred to Jupiter as ‘Sherlock Holmes’ throughout their encounter. The crime boss had even gone as far as to engage the First Investigator in a duel, reminiscent of the final encounter between Holmes and Moriarty in the books of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

“Okay, okay, but then how does Shackles & Chains fit into the picture?” Pete asked.

“The club is owned by Anthracite Inc.”

Pete took a sip of his milkshake. “So you think this could be a company owned by Grey?”

“It’s the same company that owns the Silver Henhouse, according to this entry... and anthracite is a name for a dark shade of grey.”

“So it’s not Palmer playing with us at all, but Grey? Do you think he wants to take revenge on us?” Pete got nervous. “You saved his life then, so we should be at least even with him. Besides, I thought he should still be in prison.”

“I haven’t been able to check that out yet, thanks to the slow connection here,” Jupiter said in frustration.

Almost simultaneously, a giant of a trucker stepped up behind them. “You guys have been hogging this thing for far too long. Now it’s my turn. I’ve got six hours more to drive today.”

“We were on the computer for ten minutes at the most!” defended Jupiter, but the trucker’s look silenced him. The First Investigator did not want to risk a fight.

“It’s okay.” He stood up. “Come on, Pete. We know the most important thing now.”

“In there!” Palmer pushed Bob into the barren bathroom of a motel. It was a dingy flophouse on the outskirts of Reno.

Palmer had apparently rented this room while Bob was out cold on the back seat of the car. He had then woken up with a severe headache, which was not helped by the severe heat inside the car. Only when the coast was clear had Palmer freed him and pushed him across the yard into this motel room.

“I’ll untie you for a moment so you can go to the toilet... but no funny business!” Palmer untied Bob’s bonds. “Trust me, you’ll be history before the police even break down the door!”

Bob nodded silently. He sensed that Palmer was not bluffing.

“There’s only one reason you’re still alive!” said Palmer quietly as he walked to the door. “I need you as leverage to draw out your friends.” Without another word, he left the bathroom.

Bob listened. Shortly afterwards, he heard his captor’s voice, although it was soft. Palmer was on the phone.

Bob looked around. There was no window, no fan and no air conditioning in the small bathroom. Instead, at the top of the wall, there was a rectangular metal frame. On it was a plastic grille cover with a handle. Bob was sure that this was the opening to a ventilation duct. He then stepped on the toilet seat to reach the handle. Careful not to make any tell-tale noise, Bob opened the cover and peered through the opening. Not much could be seen, but he could now hear better what was being said in the next room.

“He’s not there?” Palmer asked. “Then get hold of him now! Tell him I’ve got one of the brats he set on me, and then tell him that he has lost the game!”

A short silence followed, then Palmer spoke up again: “I don’t care about that. I make the rules around here, understand? And I was expecting him in person, not three half-grown investigators.”

Bob tried to draw a logical conclusion from what he had heard, but it was difficult for him. Who did Palmer want to talk to? And who had set The Three Investigators on Palmer?

“Of course I can guess that. He had that Reynolds abducted and simply passed on my instructions to three kids, but your boss won’t get away with that!” Then Palmer slammed the phone down.

Bob hurriedly closed the plastic grille cover. Palmer could come into the bathroom at any moment! Heart pounding, he got off the toilet seat, sat on the edge of the shower tray and waited.

However, Palmer stayed in the bedroom for quite a while. When he finally came into the bathroom, he had disguised himself. Bob would not have recognized him if Palmer’s voice had not been so cruelly familiar to him by now.

“I have to go now!” Palmer grabbed Bob and tied his hands behind his back. He then gagged him. “If you wait here nicely, I’ll take this off you again tonight!”

Jupiter drove the MG along State Route 439 to Clark and then turned onto Interstate 80 towards Reno. They winced at every police siren. Jupiter didn’t dare drive even a little faster than the speed limit allowed. Time was running out and he could not risk being stopped by the police.

“The casinos are in the city centre,” Jupiter explained as he drove through the grey outskirts, past motels, car parks and fast food restaurants. “—And there, hopefully, we’ll also find a shop where we can get casino-appropriate attire. On the website of the Black & White Casino I didn’t find a reference to the dress code—but if it turns out on site that we have to dress up, I don’t want to go out again to buy something. We just don’t have that much time.”

“We’re going to use quite a lot of the money buying suits. If we don’t find a good deal, we’ll only have enough for the motel, something to eat and maybe half a tank of petrol.”

“I know,” Jupiter admitted, “but we’ll worry about that later.”

Pete was silent for a while, then he hit the dashboard with the flat of his hand. Jupiter startled.

“Jupe, I want to know now what you’re planning!”

“I can’t tell you that,” the First Investigator declared forcefully. “It all depends on whether we get Palmer this time.”

“What if we don’t make it?” Pete did not let up. “What do we do then? Rob a bank after all? Rob more people? Abduct a cop?” He talked himself into a rage. “You know, there are lines you don’t cross! I certainly don’t feel like doing the Bonnie and Clyde thing. You can end up being ambushed and killed in a hail of bullets.”

“It doesn’t have to be like that,” Jupiter said irresolutely.

Pete shook his head. “We used to be The Three Investigators, if you remember.”

“We still are. We’re going to get Bob back and put the culprit behind bars.”

“—Except that we are more likely to land in trouble.” Pete still didn’t give in. “There are no good guys in this game anymore. It’s just the devil against Beelzebub, and we’re in the middle of it.”

“What do you suggest?”

“If we don’t get hold of Palmer tonight, we’ll turn to Inspector Cotta. We’ll think of a way to ask him for help inconspicuously.”

Jupiter thought for a moment, then nodded barely noticeably. “Good.”

“Good?”

“We’ve played by Palmer’s rules long enough, Pete. You’re right—it’s time we take matters into our own hands... and that gives me an idea!”

Jupiter braked and pointed to a multi-storey building on the side of the road, the ground floor of which was a shop. Above the door hung an old-fashioned-looking sign that said: ‘Janus Costumes—Sales and Rentals’. The First Investigator parked and asked Pete to accompany him.

“As we have seen, Palmer is a master of disguise, but we will not be misled any longer. We’re turning the tables on him.”

The First Investigator entered the crowded shop, which seemed like a curious mix of thrift shop, theatre dressing room and museum. There were ball gowns, fairy costumes, clown noses, wigs of all colours and lengths, plastic swords, jackal masks, witch hats, silk gloves, fake ears, dentures with pointy teeth and boxes of make-up.

A plump woman of about fifty smiled at them. “Can I help you?”

“Sure you can!” Jupiter’s eyes lit up as he purposefully headed for a rack of evening wear.

15. Officer Jones

The Black & White Casino was located in a black and white painted hotel complex with mirrored windows. The huge building had a crescent-shaped canopy at the front, lit by thousands of small lamps. A red velvet carpet led up some wide steps to the main entrance.

“Time for our entrance!” said Jupiter, after a glance at his watch. He adjusted his tie. Side by side, they strode up the steps to the entrance.

A doorman opened the door and the two investigators entered the spacious entrance area of the casino. When asked, they showed their fake driver’s licences and bought a few chips. Then, however, they did not go straight to the roulette tables, but to the toilets, which were located in the corridor between the anteroom and the gambling hall.

“It has to be quick!” said Jupiter as he opened a plastic bag and took out Pete’s disguise.

“It smells pretty musty!” hissed the Second Investigator.

“It was the best choice! Palmer must not recognize you under any circumstances!”

“It’s all right,” Pete grumbled between clenched teeth.

He stuck on a scraggly full beard and sideburns that made him look ten years older. Then he put on a pair of glasses that hadn’t been in fashion for half an eternity. His new look was rounded off with a long-haired, auburn wig. He made a ponytail with an elastic band and then stared in the mirror, aghast. “I look abysmally ugly! If Kelly saw me like this—”

“I didn’t know you were so vain!” Jupiter commented.

“I’m not, but this looks really bad—kind of like a fashion-confused abominable snowman!”

“The long hair suits you.”

“Yeah, but the glasses are creepy! If I didn’t have them, I might still pass for a surfer hippie.”

“The glasses stay! Palmer won’t recognize you that way, and you can go to the gaming tables too. The dress code doesn’t forbid long hair or old-fashioned suits.”

Ten minutes later, Pete entered the gambling hall alone. Jupiter had stayed in the toilet. Instead, he had given Pete a small wireless microphone to put in his shirt pocket. In this way, he could speak to Jupiter, who had a receiver with him.

An older woman in a long evening gown eyed the disguised Second Investigator critically and whispered something to her companion. Pete grinned with effort. His neck itched because of the fake beard, but he could not scratch it now. Indecisively, he walked between the gaming tables.

Shortly before eight, he still hadn’t spotted Palmer. There was a whole row of tables for card games and a total of four roulette tables—two of which, however, were not in use at the moment. Pete sat down at one of the two occupied tables in a position such that he could also see the second occupied table. Then he looked around as inconspicuously as possible.

Next to an overweight man with blond hair sat a woman in a fur coat. Next to her was another woman with her blonde hair unflatteringly tousled. She was pushing a large stack of chips on ‘black’. The last person was a slim, black-haired man with a thin moustache, and he

was hesitating and passing his chips from one hand to the other. At the other table were a group of Asian tourists, a brown-haired man with glasses and an old lady in a silver dress.

A short distance behind the table stood a powerfully built woman with red hair. She looked as if she was waiting for someone. Diagonally behind her, next to a pot with a palm tree, Pete spotted a man who seemed to be watching the roulette table. Was that Palmer? The Second Investigator was not sure.

Pete had to get closer to the suspect... but how was he supposed to do that inconspicuously without blowing his cover? He decided to ask the woman with the red hair what time it was. After all, she was standing only a few metres away from the suspect.

Pete got up from his seat and wandered around the roulette table, pretended to be interested in the current round of games and then turned away. Slowly he headed for the woman, who was just looking at her watch again. "Excuse me, ma'am."

She looked up but said nothing.

"I wonder if you could tell me what time it is?" He smiled at her and at the same time tried to watch the man over her shoulder, who had just stepped out from behind the palm tree. Up close, the man was quite small and slender. Palmer might be a master of disguise, but he could not shrink himself. Therefore, the man was ruled out. With a delay, Pete noticed that the red-haired woman was silently holding out her wrist with the watch to him.

"Oh, excuse me!" He hurriedly glanced at the watch without really looking at the time. "Thank you!"

The woman still said nothing, but returned his smile curtly. Pete suspected she was shy. The nervous hand gesture with which she loosened and adjusted the dark green sequinned scarf at her neck matched this. Pete flinched, then thanked her again and turned on his heel.

At the roulette table, he sat down on an empty seat but he paid no attention to the game. Something else preoccupied him. He had only seen the woman's neck for a split second, but he was sure—she had had an Adam's apple!

So the red-haired woman could only be a man. That would also explain why she didn't want to speak. Her deep voice would have given her away. Pete turned around and focussed on the woman. The height and stature matched Mitch Palmer. The disguise was uncannily good, but now that he looked closely, his suspicions grew stronger. The ring she wore on her left hand could well confirm that the supposed woman was indeed Palmer. Among all the other jewellery, the Second Investigator had not noticed it at first, but now he recognized it—it was the chunky ring Palmer had worn in the photo from the box.

Pete pretended to look for something in his shirt pocket and spoke softly into the microphone: "Spotted Palmer. Dressed as a woman. Red hair, wearing ring from photo. Standing to the right of the roulette table... by the big palm tree."

He grinned contentedly. Now he just had to wait for Jupiter to enter the room. Again and again, he peered at the entrance to the hall. Sure enough, in the next moment, the First Investigator appeared, dressed in a police uniform from the costume shop.

Now the second phase of their plan could begin. Pete stood up, walked past the disguised man and then abruptly turned on his heel. Before Palmer could react, Pete grabbed him by the arm. "Freeze!"

Jupiter rushed towards them with his toy gun drawn. "Reno Police Department!"

"Let go of me!" hissed Palmer.

"No way!" Pete grabbed him tighter by the arm so he couldn't break away.

"Got you at last, Palmer!" Jupiter pointed the muzzle of his gun at the man in the women's clothes.

In the meantime, a whole row of casino visitors had rushed over and gathered around Jupiter, Pete and Palmer.

“What are you doing with the lady?” asked a rotund, elderly man.

“This lady here is not a lady at all, but in fact a cunning pickpocket and swindler,” Jupiter explained in a matter-of-fact tone. “We have been on his trail for some time. My colleague here was the decoy.”

“Look!” With a flourish, Pete grabbed Palmer’s hair and tore what was a wig off. That alone seemed to convince people.

“You have the right to remain silent,” Jupiter declared as he handcuffed Palmer.

“Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you.”

Palmer apparently preferred to remain silent, perhaps because Jupiter had raised his gun again after the handcuffs had clicked into place.

“You’re coming with us now.” Jupiter and Pete led Palmer out under the approving gaze of the casino patrons.

When they had just got out of the gambling hall, Jupiter saw out of the corner of his eye that two men in dark grey suits were walking diagonally behind them. He feared that they were Grey’s people.

“In there!” he shouted to Pete as a lift door opened directly in front of them.

An elderly couple stepped out of the lift. Jupiter pushed Palmer into the cabin, pressed the ‘4’ button, followed by frantically pressing the ‘Close’ button. The two men quickened their steps.

“Get on with it!” Pete urged in a panic as Jupiter pressed the ‘Close’ button even more energetically.

“The lift is not responding!”

16. Tough Negotiations

The men in the grey suits were only four metres away from the lift. Jupiter pressed the 'Close' button again.

Palmer looked from one to the other. Apparently he didn't know himself whether he would rather escape with Jupiter and Pete or be captured by Grey's men. The moment one of the men began running towards them, the lift door slid shut and the lift began to move up.

When the lift was slowly moving up, Jupe looked at the lift control panel and saw that there were another nine floors above the ground floor. The '4' button had been lighted up. He thought for a moment and then pressed the '6' button as well.

At the fourth floor, the lift door opened. Pete was about to go out when Jupe stopped him.

"Are we going out or what?" Pete asked.

"Not this floor, but the sixth," Jupe said.

"What's the difference? Why did you press the fourth floor then?"

"To deceive them to come looking for us here," Jupe explained. "We'll get out on the sixth floor."

"Great idea!" Palmer said mockingly. "I'm in safe hands then!"

The lift went up to the sixth floor. As the lift door was opening, Jupe pressed all the other buttons so that the lift would stop at all other floors. Then they got out and hurried through the corridors of the sixth floor.

"Pete, can you open one of the doors with your lock picks?" asked Jupiter, out of breath.

"No," Pete replied. "These are electronic locks. You need those plastic cards for that."

At that moment, a cleaning lady on the night shift, pushed her cart out of one of the rooms. She was a small woman, probably Mexican by her looks.

"¡Ay!" she cried, startled, when she saw Jupiter in uniform with his gun drawn. Then her eyes fell on Palmer, who was still wearing the evening dress, but now cut a strange image without the wig on.

"Reno Police," Jupiter said. "Please leave this corridor immediately and go to another floor!"

"¿Qué?" the woman asked, startled.

Jupiter repeated his instruction in Spanish: "*Policía de Reno. ¡Por favor, salga de este pasillo inmediatamente y vaya a otra planta!*"

In response, the woman nodded and murmured "*Sí, sí*" and pushed her cart away. She left the door open.

Without hesitation, the First Investigator gave Palmer a shove. "Go on, get in there!"

All three of them disappeared into the hotel room.

"Where is Bob?" Jupiter asked Palmer coldly after Pete had closed and locked the door.

Palmer remained silent.

"Hey!" Jupe raised his voice. "Can you hear me? Where is Bob?"

"I thought you told me that I have the right to remain silent?" Palmer asked mockingly.

"I'm not a policeman, and whatever I said out there does not apply now, so stop playing games with us."

"You don't think you're going to win the game this way," Palmer continued. His voice was quiet and almost friendly. Yet there was something threatening in it.

"You bet. We got you and that makes us the winners according to your rules."

"Not without the jury's approval," Palmer replied coolly, "and the jury is me."

"We are not interested in your games anymore," Jupe said sternly. "Now you have a choice—release our two friends and you go free... or if you insist on keeping silent, we'll hand you over to the police."

"You'll never see them again!" Palmer smiled superiorly.

Jupiter was not deterred. "Search him, Pete!"

Pete patted the dress down and opened the handbag Palmer had with him. He uncovered a few dollar notes, a fake ID card, a room key and a rectangular metal box.

"The key doesn't belong to this hotel, does it?" said Jupiter.

Pete looked at the tag. "'Western Six Motel, Reno'," he read out, "and underneath is the number 27."

"Probably his hotel and room number," Jupiter said. "Hopefully that is where we'll find Bob."

"What about Reynolds?" asked Pete.

"We'll get Bob first, and then give this criminal one more chance to lead us to Reynolds," Jupiter decided, "otherwise we'll take him straight to the police!"

"We'll see," Palmer replied calmly. "I'm just wondering how you're going to make it to exit of this hotel, let alone out. Grey's people are everywhere."

"They're after you. I believe you have something Grey wants. That's how the game works, isn't it?" Jupiter pointed at Palmer's things, which were now scattered on the bedspread.

Pete, on the other hand, looked nervously at the door. "How are we really going to get out of here? Grey's people are hardly going to let us walk out just like that."

The First Investigator grabbed Palmer's room key. On the back was the address and telephone number. "I'd say we'll stay here for now."

"What are you going to do?" Pete asked.

"Make a phone call!" Jupiter pulled out his mobile phone and dialled the number on the room key tab.

It beeped briefly, then someone picked up. "Western Six Motel, Reno... how can I help you?"

"Hello, my name is George Bender," Jupiter said in his deepest voice. "Listen, I have a problem. We're celebrating our friend Larry's bachelor party today. However, the boys have gone a bit overboard and abducted Larry's little brother, Bob. He is in one of your rooms, perhaps even tied up and gagged. Therefore, I am requesting you to help us look for him and release him."

The man at the other end was silent for a moment, then repeated in confusion: "Tied up and gagged?"

"Yes, sir. As I said, the boys have overdone it again, but there's no need to call the police. It's enough if you free him so he can come back to the party."

The motel clerk still didn't seem entirely convinced.

"Please, sir!" said Jupiter now insistently. "It's Room Number 27!"

"Well, I can send my colleague there," the man offered.

"Please do! I will call again in a few minutes," Jupiter replied gratefully. Then he said goodbye and hung up.

The next few minutes dragged on endlessly. Palmer looked at the two boys with undisguised interest. He did not seem anxious or nervous. Pete, on the other hand, was restlessly bobbing up and down on his toes. When Jupiter finally reached for his mobile phone again, he exhaled audibly.

It took a little longer this time for the phone to be picked up. "Western Six Motel, Reno... how can I help you?"

"It's George Bender again," Jupiter reported back. "Have you found Bob?"

"Yes, indeed. He was locked in the bathroom!"

Jupiter felt relief slowly spreading through him. He relaxed a little.

"Don't you think we should call the police?" the clerk asked.

"It was really just an exaggerated joke for Larry's bachelor party," Jupiter affirmed. "Can I speak to him?"

"Yes, one moment please." Then the hotel clerk said something that sounded like: "Here, for you! It's George Bender."

"Hello?" asked Bob hesitantly.

"Bob! It's me, Jupe!"

"My, am I glad to hear your voice!"

"Are you all right?"

"Palmer didn't touch a hair on my head, but still I feel like I've done a marathon."

"I can imagine that."

"Where are you now?" Bob asked.

"Very close to you, at the Black & White. It's a casino with a hotel, but before I tell you more, we have Palmer!"

"What?"

"Yes, but he won't tell us where Chief Reynolds is. So—"

"He won't know!" Bob interrupted his friend. "Palmer didn't even know about the whole Reynolds thing."

"What?"

"Palmer locked me in the bathroom, but I was still able to eavesdrop on a phone call from him through the ventilation duct. Luckily he didn't drug me again tonight! He wanted to talk to someone who wasn't there, and I think that someone is the one who challenged us to the game. It wasn't Palmer at all! In fact, Palmer isn't responsible for the abduction of Chief Reynolds!"

"That's interesting..." Jupiter murmured, "but please continue!"

"Palmer said on the phone that the unknown person did not pursue him personally, but sent three kids instead."

"So we were roped in," Jupiter realized quickly. "I suspect that we are dealing with none other than William M. Grey."

He heard Bob draw in his breath sharply at the other end of the line. "Grey? Then we're in deep trouble!"

"Presumably Grey is also behind the call to us at Headquarters and the box of those things," the First Investigator concluded. "I get it now! Just like he did to us once before, Grey simply forwarded us the message from the person he is targeting—in this case, it's Palmer. I should have seen his pattern! He loves to use others as pawns."

"Don't blame yourself, Jupe," said Bob. "The main thing now is to free Reynolds! The best thing is for me to come to you."

"No, we need you for our Plan B. If we haven't contacted you again in an hour, you have to call Cotta. Then we have no choice but to involve the police after all. Cotta can then decide

how to proceed.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Pete has asked me that several times today,” Jupiter said. “With what we now know, I will contact Grey.”

“Just be careful then!”

After hanging up, the First Investigator turned to Palmer’s items.

“What does Grey want from you? What are the stakes of your game?”

Palmer just smiled.

“Answer now! Bob is safe and we know you don’t have Chief Reynolds. Consequently, you have no more leverage against us.”

“—And you have no leverage over me,” Palmer replied calmly.

“Oh really?” Jupiter pretended to think. “You are sitting in front of me handcuffed and I have a gun.” He raised the toy gun he was still holding.

Palmer laughed out. “The only problem with these things is that you have to fire them too. It’s just a tiny little movement—no more than bending a finger, and yet that’s exactly what seems almost impossible the first time. Once you’ve done it, you can never undo it. A direct hit will change everything—everything you are and everything you will be afterwards.” For a moment, a maniacal smile flashed across his face, as if he almost wished Jupiter would pull the trigger.

“Stop making big speeches, Palmer,” Jupiter replied calmly. “Consideration of the facts opens up another possibility for me. I can simply hand you over to Grey’s people. They will be very pleased to have you. I, on the other hand, don’t have to get my fingers dirty with this option.”

Palmer still looked calm, but his eyes blinked faster than before.

“So, what’s between you and Grey?” Jupiter asked.

“Grey knew where I was in LA at the time,” Palmer explained, surprisingly unemotionally. “When I turned down an offer from him, he betrayed me to the police. I fled to Rocky Beach and almost got caught there.”

“And now you’re out for revenge?”

“Revenge? If you want to look at it that way... but I call it more of a small, sporting challenge!”

“You were hoping, of course, that Grey would set out to find you personally or mobilize as many of his best people as possible,” Jupiter said when Palmer did not continue. “Instead, he hired us. I take it that merely being hunted by teenagers didn’t suit you.”

Palmer gave Jupiter a pitying look instead of an answer, but he did not let himself be distracted.

“As it happens, however, it is we who have finally been able to get you, Mr Palmer.” The First Investigator sat down beside the oblong metal box.

“Careful, Juve!” Pete took a step forward. “There could be a bomb in there!”

Until then, the Second Investigator had only watched idly. Palmer worried him. The man looked so harmless, but at the same time radiated something deeply dangerous, as if he were capable of anything. Pete shook off this oppressive thought. “Watch out, please!”

“If there was a bomb in the box, not even Palmer would sit here so quietly.” Jupiter let the two small locks snap open. Then he flipped up the lid.

17. The End Game

“Medication?” said Pete in surprise as he looked into the box.

Jupiter looked at the labels on the plastic vials. “Sleeping pills, tranquilizers and other psychotropic drugs!”

“—And Grey wants these so badly from him?” asked Pete incredulously.

“I’m guessing that this stuff is for personal use... and maybe also for keeping Bob quiet,” Jupiter said and then turned to Palmer. “So what does Grey want?”

Palmer was still sitting calmly refusing to say anything.

“Okay, if you refuse to cooperate...” Jupe began and then turned to Pete. “Help me get him into the bathroom.”

After Jupe had used another pair of handcuffs to secure Palmer to the towel heater in the bathroom, he said: “If you keep nice and quiet, we won’t turn you over to Grey! Believe me, an escape attempt would be a really stupid idea. Grey’s men would make short work of you!”

Jupiter closed the bathroom door. Then he took a door wedge and pushed it under the bathroom door to block it from opening.

The First Investigator reached for his mobile phone again. He keyed in the number printed on the Black & White Hotel folder next to the television.

Shortly afterwards, a woman’s voice answered: “Reception, how can I help you?”

“My name is Jupiter Jones and I would like to speak to your boss.”

“Our managing director, Mr Shemira, is in a meeting right now.”

“I don’t want to speak to the managing director, I want to speak to the owner—Mr Grey.”

“But you can’t!” the woman said vehemently.

“He might be in Los Angeles now. Surely you can put me through to him, unless he’s still in custody at the moment, which I don’t think he is.”

“No,” the woman replied nervously, “he’s... oh, please wait a moment, sir.”

It was almost a minute before she picked up the phone again. “Mr Jones?”

“Yes?”

“He wants to talk to you—in the penthouse. Please take Lift Number 3 to the ninth floor. You will be met there.”

“Does Bob really know where we are?” Pete asked as they walked to the lift.

“Yes, you heard me tell him just now. If something happens, he should call the police,” Jupiter said. He was still wearing his police uniform, whereas Pete had already removed his beard, wig, and glasses.

“If only it’s not too late then!” said Pete. “Bullets are usually faster than police cars.”

“Then you’ll have to dodge the bullets.” Jupiter got into the lift and pressed the ‘9’ button.

“You’ve gotta be joking,” Pete looked seriously at his friend. “Maybe we could fool them with our toy guns.”

“Sure,” Jupe said. “Perhaps you are forgetting that it was he who supplied us with these things.”

They did not speak a word during the short ride. Although the lift was air-conditioned, Pete felt as if they were in a fiery volcanic vent. The cheerful lift music seemed almost mocking to him. A sombre tune would have been more appropriate, in Pete's opinion. He knew Jupiter had a plan, but even the First Investigator was not infallible.

When the door opened at the ninth floor, Pete felt even more queasy than before. A young woman in a black and white uniform joined them in the lift.

"Good evening," she said curtly. She inserted a small key into the keyhole next to the '10' button on the lift control panel and turned it clockwise. So, this was a special lift that had access to an additional floor. The woman then pressed the unlocked button for the tenth floor.

Shortly after, they stepped out of the lift into a glass walkway that led to the roof of the hotel. The sun had already set, and the lights of Reno shone up to them. They twinkled like thousands of stars. Pete would have loved to be somewhere by those lights—down below, on the streets. He peered cautiously over the parapet. A warm wind blew up to him. Pete realized he was getting goose bumps looking down from this height.

Jupiter and Pete walked across the walkway, and at the other end, they stepped into an anteroom. The young woman then turned without a word and walked back to the lift.

"Hmm... impressive..." Pete whispered. "Come to think of it, are they going to search us as before?" He was referring to a previous case where they had to go through a security search when they entered Grey's manor in San Fernando Valley in California.

"Unlikely," Jupiter whispered back. "Didn't you see the walk-through metal detector that was inconspicuously installed at the end of the walkway we just passed?"

Pete turned around and remarked: "You're right. Here we are at an airport again... and why didn't it detect the... uh... toys we are carrying?"

"The toys are made of plastic," Jupe said.

"Oh yeah..."

Just then, a man in a black suit stepped into the anteroom and made an inviting hand gesture. "Please come in!"

Jupe and Pete followed the man towards a white penthouse. It had large windows all around and was lined on one side by a kidney-shaped pool. Tubs of palm trees stood to the left and right of the door, which was already open. Classical music wafted out into the night air.

Similar to Grey's manor, there were expensive works of art and fine furniture everywhere. However, these were not antiques in the British country house style, but modern design pieces. Everything they could see was decorated in black and white. There was not a single splash of colour.

The man in the black suit led the boys into a brightly lit living room. The music was now as loud as if they were standing right in front of an orchestra pit.

However, Jupiter paid no attention to that. He focused all his attention on William M. Grey the gangland boss, who was sitting in his wheelchair at one of the windows with his back to them. Only when the last bar had faded away and it suddenly became oppressively quiet in the room did Grey move his wheelchair and turn to face them.

"Sherlock Holmes..." the thin man with grey hair said with an English accent. There was a hint of a smile on his face. "So we meet again!"

"I hope you don't insist on being addressed as Moriarty," Jupiter replied as he stepped closer. "I prefer not to play games today."

"Tsk! Tsk!" Grey eyed Jupiter's fake uniform closely. "All of life is a game... and I understand you've just beaten Palmer in his little game of cat and mouse."

"We had no other choice."

“Not really,” Grey said with an expression on his face that was hard to interpret. “You always have a choice, Holmes... and you’ve made your choice. After all, you took on the game, and played it with a most remarkable series of... uh... how shall I put it—unorderly activities. It has been an extraordinary pleasure for me to learn what you did!”

“Two lives were at stake!” Jupiter hoped he wasn’t blushing. “—But let’s move on to the interesting questions of the evening.”

“And what would that be?”

“How did you know we would come here to Reno? I assume you have interests in numerous other casinos, bars and clubs in other cities. Palmer could certainly have led us to another place.”

“You threw a spanner in the works by surprising Rockford, but he’s not my only footsoldier,” Grey said. “You see, I have an army of people with technical gizmos. Sure, it took a little more time before we managed to latch back on to you. When I learned where you were heading, I immediately flew here to Reno.”

Now it was also clear to the First Investigator that Grey had earlier known that he and Pete were in his hotel, except maybe not the specific room otherwise Palmer would have been captured by now.

However, Jupiter had to grudgingly admit that he had not thought to check the MG for a transmitter after he took Rockford’s receiver. However, they had been in a great hurry after leaving Rockford tied up at the petrol station. Besides, it didn’t matter now. Rather, the First Investigator was dying to know more. “How is it that you are no longer in prison?”

“My dear Holmes, don’t you think it is now my turn to ask a question? Like in a chess game, players take alternate turns to make a move. Oh well, I’ll turn a blind eye for once.” Grey paused for a moment. “As I said when I was arrested, I have excellent lawyers. Criminal law is a most exciting field—even more exciting are the loopholes and back doors that open up when you are familiar with the process. So, thanks to my lawyers, I am on the loose again.” He laughed out as if he had made a particularly good joke. “On the loose! Well, not really...” He pointed to his wheelchair. “I’m bound to this set of wheels, anyway... Now I ask you, dear Holmes—where is Palmer?”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you that, sir, or rather I prefer not to.”

“Regrettable,” Grey replied. He waved to his employee. Then he pointed to Pete. “I’m sure Watson would like to have a look over the roofs of the city!”

Pete opened his eyes. Grey’s employee suddenly appeared beside Pete and reached for him. Instinctively, Pete dodged. What should he do? Run away? Did he have any chance of escape?

“Wait!” shouted Jupiter.

Pete detected a slight tremor in the First Investigator’s voice, even though he was obviously trying hard to sound calm.

“I have what you want,” Juve said.

“And what do I want, pray tell?”

“This thing here...” Juve said and held out the ring he had taken from Palmer before locking him in the bathroom.

Grey did not move.

“It is probably very valuable,” Juve continued, “maybe it even has a personal meaning for you—a family heirloom or a gift from someone important to you. In any case, it has an engraving on the inside that identifies you as the owner... This is my deal—I give you the ring in exchange for the freedom of us and Samuel Reynolds.”

“And you think that’s a good deal? I could just have the ring taken off you right now.”

“It’s not a business deal, it’s a game. We won the one against Palmer, and you have won the one for your ring. You get it back and we step out of your life.”

“I have nothing to do with this... Reynolds, whoever he is.” Grey smiled and put his hands together.

“Sure you don’t.” Jupiter said in a lowered voice. He was sure that Grey was lying about this, but he decided to play along. “Since you have nothing to do with him, I’m sure you won’t mind if he is released from his captivity unharmed.”

Grey looked Jupiter in the eye. “Like I said, I have nothing to do with Reynolds, but I sure can do something to you, Holmes, and your Watson.”

Pete gritted his teeth and clenched his fists.

“Palmer is an odious chap, Holmes. Leave him to me.”

Jupiter shook his head. “I can’t. Palmer belongs in a court of law.”

“What if he also has a good lawyer?”

Jupiter hesitated only briefly. “Then good for him... but let me restate my deal—you get your ring; Palmer goes to the police; and my friends and I leave this place unscathed. That’s all I can offer you.”

Grey turned back to the window and looked out at his illuminated pool. It took several agonizingly long minutes before he finally held out his hand. “I accept the deal. Give me the ring.”

Jupiter slowly walked forward and handed Grey the ring. Pete held his breath. He expected the door to open at any moment and several men with machine guns barge in to shoot at them.

However, Grey only studied his ring intently. Then he turned to Jupiter again. “Oh yes, there’s one more thing. As an additional thanks to you for returning my ring... regarding the cost of the fuel and the \$400 you... uh... ‘borrowed’ from Rockford... let’s just say that you can forget about this small matter...”

Jupiter remained silent.

“We are now even, Holmes... but I might contact you if the opportunity arises.” Grey put the ring in the pocket of his jacket. “I can always use capable people.”

“We are investigators,” Jupiter replied. “You know which side of the law we’re on.”

“Well, as we have seen, when it matters most, the end certainly justifies the means. One day I will certainly make you an interesting offer, dear Holmes. Until then, I remain grateful to you for the recovery of my property.”

Jupiter again remained silent.

“You are free to go, Holmes,” Grey finally said.

“Thank you,” Jupiter said curtly.

Grey waved to his employee, who then escorted Jupiter and Pete out of the penthouse and to the lift.

18. To Tell or Not to Tell?

Jupiter, Pete and Bob met a week later at Samuel Reynolds's apartment. The retired police chief had invited The Three Investigators. They now sat on his balcony and looked out over the coast. As a guest gift, the boys brought along a cherry pie courtesy of Aunt Mathilda.

After the boys' return from Reno, Aunt Mathilda had had some very stern words for her nephew. She had also given Jupiter several days of hard work at the salvage yard—a kind of penance for his lawless deeds. Pete had also had a busy week with many hours of summer classes. Only Bob had escaped reasonably unscathed.

"It's good that you have disposed of your toy guns," said Chief Reynolds after they had all eaten a piece of the pie. Although he had no visible injuries, it was clear that the strain of the few days in captivity had taken its toll on him.

"Inspector Cotta yelled at us for almost an hour," Pete said dejectedly. "It probably would have gone on forever if he hadn't gone hoarse."

Reynolds looked concerned. "The inspector is glad that everything turned out so well, and he knows how grateful I am to you three. Still, he had to do a lot to keep you from being brought to justice."

"We give him credit for that too!" said Bob quickly.

Chief Reynolds poured them cocoa from a jug. "Now please tell me the whole thing from beginning to end. I'm curious about the details!"

"There was an issue between Grey and Palmer, the details of which were not known to us," Jupe said. "It seemed that Palmer had something that Grey wanted, and Grey made him an offer. However, Palmer turned it down, and Grey betrayed him to the police. However, Palmer escaped, and then he decided to play a different game with Grey—possibly to get a better deal.

"So Palmer sent Grey a message. Instead of playing the game, Grey created something to get us involved. In this case, he got you abducted—even though as you know it, there is no proof of that. Grey incorporated Palmer's message with the video clip of you, and sent them to us to implicate Palmer was behind your abduction. That forced us to take action. In effect, it was Grey's ploy to get us to look for Palmer for him. He had his men following us all the while."

"This is so similar to our previous case with Grey," Pete interrupted.

Bob continued: "Palmer's plan was to meet Grey's people at the Pahrump cemetery. Instead, I turned up and he abducted me instead. Only then, he found out about our involvement, thinking that Grey sent us to do the dirty work. Palmer forced it out from me where Pete and Jupe were. Still thinking that Grey hired us, he decided to capture Pete and Jupe to get Grey out."

"So he created the next clue and put the message on my car's windscreen," Pete took over. "That was for us to meet him at the roulette table at Black & White Casino. Had he succeeded, he would have all three of us to bargain with Grey. As it turned out, we captured him instead. Then Jupe and I found—"

"Uh... hold on," Jupiter interrupted Pete. "What happened was that I did not want to hand over Palmer to Grey. Instead, Pete and I went to meet him. After finding out that they

do have a problem with each other, we thought it was best to hand Palmer to the police.”

“And in that case, you could have well saved Palmer’s life,” Chief Reynolds commented. “Who knows what Grey would have done to him.”

“Yes,” Jupiter agreed.

“Talking about Palmer, remember I found out that he likes to lay his tracks to places that had something to do with his pursuer?” Bob took over. “—Now it makes a lot of sense why his clues provide leads to Shackle & Chains, the Silver Henhouse, and finally to the Black & White Casino in Reno—these establishments are all owned by Grey! ... And his pursuer was actually Grey, not us—although Grey had us do the work for him.”

“If that is the case, what about the cemetery? Did Grey also own that?” Pete wondered.

“Hmm... unlikely,” Bob said, “so that’s an odd choice.”

“But if you recall, that clue had three possible locations,” Pete added, “so it was possible that he couldn’t get me at the Silver Henhouse, so he went to the next nearest place, which was the cemetery.”

“In any case, Palmer is now in police custody,” said Chief Reynolds with satisfaction. “So you’ve also closed my old case and finally put this criminal behind bars.”

“However, we couldn’t tell the police about Grey’s involvement,” Jupiter admitted contritely. “We have no proof that he is guilty. Not even your abduction can be proven against him—even though your spontaneous release on Sunday coincides with after our visit to Grey’s penthouse.”

What had happened with Reynolds’s abduction was that after he returned to his apartment from a trip to San Diego, two masked men had overpowered and sedated him. Then they had taken him to an unknown place where the video clip of him being tied to a chair was recorded. A few days later on Sunday, they had sedated him again and brought him back to his apartment.

“Grey makes sure there is no evidence, and in any case, you three shouldn’t go against him anymore,” Reynolds warned. “You should leave such cases to the police and the FBI with a clear conscience.” He stood up. “We’re out of cocoa. You want some more?”

“Sure,” Pete said with a glance into his mug.

No sooner had the chief disappeared into the living room than Bob leaned forward and whispered to the First Investigator: “You have to tell him, Jupe.”

Jupiter took out his mobile phone and tapped on it until it showed one of the photos of Grey’s ring. The ring was gold but without any gemstones. It had a flat circular head, and in the centre of the head was a small embossed triangle coloured red. Surrounding the triangle were engraved numerous and randomly placed squiggly lines.

Bob leaned over and looked at the photo. “Actually, when did you take these photos?” he asked.

Pete replied instead: “—In the hotel room, just after we locked Palmer in the bathroom... Jupe, I agree with Bob that you have to tell Reynolds that you have several photos of the ring!”

“I can’t,” Jupiter said. “The longer I look at it, the more convinced I am that the ring itself isn’t valuable to Grey, rather, it’s the design on it.”

“Perhaps it’s a key to secret data,” Pete said. “That’s exactly why you have to tell Reynolds.”

“He’s retired,” Jupiter said as he pocketed his mobile phone. “—But he still feels committed to the police... and so he might pass this tip on to Cotta. Then it ends up at the FBI and Grey can work out that we were the source. For all you know, The Three Investigators will end up in a witness protection programme.”

“Whatever...” Bob said. “Perhaps you should delete the photos, then.”

“No,” Jupiter objected. “I’m going to keep them and find out for myself what the ring is for. I want to be ready for the day I meet Grey again.”

“Well, Holmes, if you do go and meet him again,” Pete said, “leave me out of it.”

They remained silent until Chief Reynolds came out onto the balcony with the jug.

“Well, what are you looking so sad about?” Reynolds said. “You’ve caught a wanted criminal, saved me, and had a really exciting weekend trip!” He smiled mischievously. “By the way, what happened to your fake driver’s licences?”

Pete choked on the piece of cake he had just shoved into his mouth.

“Oh you know, I don’t need to know everything either.” Chief Reynolds sat down. “I can certainly rely on you to stay on the right track in your future investigations.”

“Yes,” Pete said wholeheartedly, while the chief refilled his mug. “I’ve had enough of being an adult for the time being anyway.”

“Well then.” Chief Reynolds raised his cocoa mug. “To the future of The Three Investigators—youth investigators with conviction!”